

Chapter 1

The Leadership Edge

In which Joe comes to terms with his predicament and challenges his beliefs about leadership...



Joe hangs up the phone on Kelly, his new boss, and walks slowly to his office window. Gazing thoughtfully across the park, he focuses on the wilting flowers in the hanging baskets, the product of a hot, dry summer. Wondering why the park wardens have not watered them, he smiles wryly, realizing that his estranged wife would say, if only she was there:

“You’re only worrying about the park wardens, Joe, because it’s easier than worrying about your own problems...”

In that second, he feels the full weight of his predicament for the first time.

As the recently appointed European head of Tiger Online Recruitment, Joe faces many challenges. His phone call with Kelly confirms this. His attention is momentarily drawn to a mother laughing as her two small children chase pigeons across the park. Frowning, he remembers his personal situation too, a situation he prefers not to think about.

“My life,” thinks Joe, “is spinning out of control...”

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Turning back to his desk, Joe forces himself to focus on his professional challenges. At the forefront of his mind is the firm's current financial performance. Sales are 25% behind target and several major accounts have not renewed their contracts in recent months. Kelly had called from Seattle, wanting to go through the numbers in detail to determine how to salvage the current year's performance. She had sounded even more agitated than usual, particularly since sales in the US and Asia Pacific had been hit badly by the sluggish economy too.

"What if these poor sales numbers are symptomatic of deeper, more malignant problems?" ponders Joe, as he looks out of the glass partitioning between his suite and the open plan office. Thinking about his leadership team, he counts all the ways in which their performance and behaviour fail to meet his expectations.

"Relationships between individuals are poor; there's a growing mistrust and some pretty unhealthy politicking taking place out there; Robert's resignation hasn't helped either," he assesses, clinically.

Robert, Tiger's former Finance Director, was Joe's top performer. He had applied for Joe's job. He didn't get it. He had moved to the position as CEO for Tiger's major competitor and Joe's former employer, Dragon Recruitment.

Spinning his chair towards the window, Joe stares out at the scorched landscape, wondering where to start. Suddenly he remembers meeting a guy on his return flight from Seattle two weeks ago. He was a "strengths coach". Joe had heard of business coaches, he'd even read a few books on business coaching; never though, had he heard of a strengths coach. Being curious by nature, Joe had spent some time getting to know this person, Richard, who had given him a

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business card when they parted at Heathrow. Joe recalls their conversation about the “deficit-based” belief system most people inherit from their childhood. Richard had explained that his job was to help leaders become more effective through focusing on strengths to achieve breakthrough thinking and to overcome challenges. At the time, Joe had been too embarrassed to admit that he was caught in the type of destructive habits Richard had described as typical of such a limiting belief system. Thinking about it now, he knew he’d had enough. He was tired of feeling trapped. It was time to find a way out and Richard’s route had sounded kind of appealing.

Mulling over what Richard had shared with him on the plane, Joe gazes into the distance. Richard had been Chief Operating Officer for one of the UK’s largest advertising firms before burnout forced him to take time out. An ambitious man, Richard had struggled to come to terms with his sudden and unexpected fall from the corporate ladder. Following six months away from work and a great deal of soul searching, Richard decided to become an executive coach. Sharing his learning, experiences and interpersonal strengths with others and helping them to succeed was the best choice he could take to move forward, he had said.

“I may end up burning out if I’m not careful. I think I’ll call him,” thinks Joe, as he reaches for his wallet to find Richard’s business card.

A few seconds later, he has it. Picking up the phone, he makes the call...

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The day before his meeting with Richard, Joe chairs his regular team meeting with Tiger’s European Regional Executive Team (TERET).

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The team comprises five members: Sally, the Sales and Marketing Director; Mark, the Operations Director; Raj, the Technical Director; Gwen, the Human Resources Director; and Phil, the new Finance Director (who is fast becoming Joe's right-hand man).

The meeting starts well, but within half an hour the usual petty in-house conflict kicks off. Mark and Raj had never seen eye-to-eye and this time their argument about a planned rebrand of the website is getting very personal.

"If you and your team can't get the site rebranded by January, we should go outside to a third party web design agency; at least they won't take holidays all the time, like you guys do!" Mark protests.

"Besides, rebranding our website should be a marketing project, not a technical project," adds Mark, looking hopefully at Sally, expecting her support.

"I'm getting frustrated with your constant criticism Mark," retorts Raj, irritably.

"You have no knowledge of web design, yet you are always criticizing what we're doing. We know what we are doing and want to do a proper job, not a half-baked one. That's why we're taking our time."

Exhausted, Joe ends the meeting, feeling utterly dejected. Yet again, his thoughts turn to his wife, Lynette. Lynette had recently left him. She had filed for divorce, citing his long work hours as one of the reasons. Joe had known that the relationship was becoming increasingly strained by his ambition and excessive working hours, but had never

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ever imagined that Lynette would leave, taking their two young children, Harry and Amelia, with her.

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Ten minutes into his meeting with Richard, Joe feels somewhat relieved. His fear of being subjected to psychoanalysis is receding. Richard appears to be more interested in what's going on in the business than in what's going on in Joe's head. Going into great detail to describe how the strengths coaching process works, Richard skilfully navigates Joe to a position of such comfort that, before Joe knows it, he is enjoying exploring in depth the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that Tiger faces.

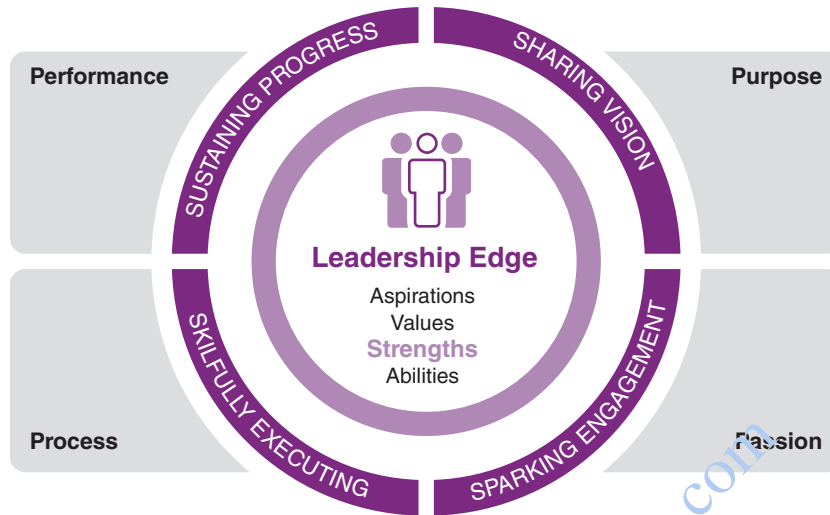
"I am confident strengths coaching can help here, Joe. I sense you need quick results so I recommend we meet every two weeks over a six-month period, a coaching contract if you like. Let me explain a little more about what this would involve and what the outcomes will be," explains Richard.

"During these sessions, we will explore a proven approach that helps leaders stretch their strengths to achieve positive outcomes in terms of their purpose, their passion, their processes and their performance.

"We will start by getting a better understanding of what you bring to this leadership role and how you can combine your core strengths, values, aspirations and abilities to move beyond boundaries – perceived or real – and give yourself what we refer to as your leadership edge.¹

¹ See Appendix, The Stretch Toolbox, 1.1. The Stretch Leadership™ Model.

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Stretch Leadership™ Model

“We will then explore the four habits of leaders at full strength: *Sharing Vision*; *Sparking Engagement*; *Skilfully Executing*; and *Sustaining Progress*. I say habits, because learning does not always translate into doing unless you choose to embed the learning with repeated behaviour, until that behaviour, that new way of being and doing, becomes automatic. Doing this, ultimately leads to better performance with very little need for external instruction or direction.

“We’ll talk more about this; all you need to know for now is that, to help you adopt these habits, we’ll look at some specific changes to your behaviour you may need to practise for a while until they become second nature.

“By the end of the final session, stretching your strengths – and those of your team – will have enabled you to lead your business to achieve

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the goals we agree on next week, and to sustain this success beyond the coaching period,” he continues.

“Think of it like a continuous journey – an expedition. The first step is to clarify and clearly communicate your aspirations, both for yourself and for this organization (where you want to go).

“The second step is to ensure everyone is aware of where it is you want to go and how you can harness your personal, team and organizational strengths to get there (what you need to pack for the expedition).

“The third step is to take action, practising your learning (selecting the best route and starting out on the journey).

“The fourth step is to become agile in stretching (and sometimes contracting) your personal, team and organizational strengths across different situations (ensuring you adapt your route when conditions change to minimize risks and get to your destination in the best way possible).

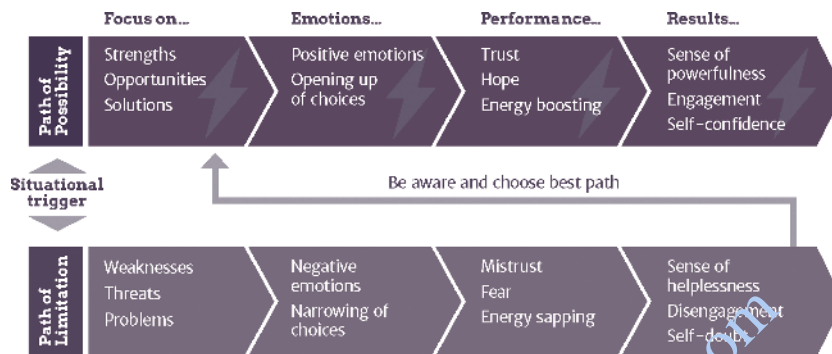
“The fifth step is to recognize the successes and setbacks you have met along the path (comparable to taking time to enjoy and learn from your success when you get there, I guess).

“It’s a five-step journey that allows you to grow gradually and sustainably. You move from aspirations to awareness, to action, to agility, to achievement.

“It is an ongoing journey though, Joe, because this naturally brings you right back to the beginning, reflecting and setting new aspirations for the next expedition.”

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Richard looks up at Joe, as if trying to gauge whether to continue. Seeing that Joe is open to more learning, Richard decides to push on. He reveals a slide on his screen.²



The Path of Possibility™ Model

“The question is, Joe, which route do you want to take? The path of limitation, where people feel stuck, isolated and full of self-doubt, with targets being missed? Or the path of possibility, leading to a sense of empowerment, where people find meaning in their work, and feel connected to the business’s success and to each other, with targets routinely beaten?”

Joe silently reflects for a few seconds. For him, such a positive approach sounds a little too optimistic, especially considering the internal weaknesses and external threats he is facing.

“Thing is, Richard, I really don’t know if I can. I’m not like you,” he finally states.

“I mean, how do you do it? Or rather, how did you do it after you quit your job as COO of that advertising agency?”

² See Appendix, The Stretch Toolbox, 1.2. The Path of Possibility™ Model.

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“Ah. Well it is about conscious choice, Joe. I’ve trained myself and I act very deliberately to get back into a positive mindset when I feel myself slipping, as we all do from time to time. With strong self-awareness, self-discipline and lots of practice, you too can spend more time on this positive path. I’m not saying it will be easy. It will take a lot of conscious effort, but you can train your brain to walk this path. Anyone can,” Richard replies looking directly at Joe.

“First you need the willingness to challenge and change your beliefs. Once you’re aware of the beliefs that you hold that are limiting you, it takes conscious effort and deep practice to reprogram them. I started by recognizing things that triggered negative thoughts, feelings and actions and consciously tried to replace these with more productive ones. For example, after I first left the agency, when people asked what I was going to do next, I’d automatically change the subject because I didn’t know the answer. I didn’t know the answer because I still wanted to be winning those big advertising contracts. I still wanted to progress to CEO of the business and I couldn’t see past what was not possible.

“I eventually realized that reacting in this way was draining, both physically and mentally. So, I chose to control the controllables and started practising to respond differently, at first with ‘I’m not sure,’ then with ‘I want to help others,’ and in the end with ‘I’m going to be a coach.’”

“Your brain, Joe, is designed to be efficient. Everyone’s is. So when your brain is under pressure, it will fall back into habits it learned early in life. Most of us have some unhealthy habits from childhood and other environmental factors. They place us on the path of limitation. We can only get off this path with a lot of self-awareness, hard work and deliberate practice,” Richard is still looking directly at Joe.

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“And I know what your next question is going to be, Joe,” he smiles, his gaze losing its intensity.

“You do?” responds Joe, intrigued.

“Yup. You want to know if this is the right path for this organization and I can tell you that it was *made* for this organization. When you live in an unpredictable environment, you need to create a strong culture of learning, empowerment and personal accountability. It is the only way to remain agile. Normal management rules based on logical analysis and problem solving are not enough. Exploration, experimentation and collaborative working need to be encouraged. The path of possibility does just that.

Joe just looks at Richard as if he is an unfinished puzzle. Richard is familiar with this response and knows what to do next. He guides the conversation back to Joe’s expectations of the coaching.

“So, where and how do you want to lead this organization, Joe? What would you like the outcomes of our coaching sessions to be?” he inquires.

Joe thinks they are obvious. “Improved results of course,” he states bluntly.

“So, in order to achieve this, what areas of your current leadership style do you think we need to explore?” probes Richard.

Joe’s thoughts turn immediately to his weaknesses. “Hmm, let me think. I suppose I don’t, typically, involve other people enough in making decisions at work. I guess I’m fairly fixed in my views. I know what

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is best, I don't need persuading by others, so I just go about making it happen," he reflects.

"So, Joe, does that mean you tend to judge people really quickly and will close the book on them without trying to help them develop if your first impressions are not good?" Richard asks.

"I suppose so. I'm rarely open to persuasion and before the conversation we're having right now, it had never actually occurred to me to look for ways to help others develop and involve them in tough decisions!" admits Joe.

Richard listens attentively, making a few notes as Joe continues to talk about his weaknesses. Then, just as Joe begins to feel drained, Richard suggests, "Joe, why don't we spend some time reflecting on what you have achieved throughout your 15-year career?"

Joe is embarrassed "boasting" about what he has done well, especially in the light of all his problems. It just feels wrong. Richard smiles encouragingly. Before Joe realizes what is happening, he is recalling events and milestones in his career where he felt that he had triumphed.

"Winning the UK contract with that major oil company in my first role as a recruiter was a major turning point. It really accelerated my career. Getting headhunted by a large organization in the same industry and moving in-house as a general manager was massively rewarding too. It gave me real insights into the internal culture of large corporations.

"Then there are particular individuals that stick in my mind, where I found the perfect roles for their experience. I always get a big kick out

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of that. I'm still in touch with some of them: Diana, who successfully moved from a CFO to a CEO role, and Ahmed, who moved through the ranks to become Head of HR for a gas and oil company, to setting up his own recruitment business, spring to mind. There are quite a lot of people, now that I think about it.

"Getting this role was a high point too, believe it or not. At the time, it felt like winning a gold medal!" Joe reflects.

Richard decides that this is a good point to ask: "How does it feel talking about your successes, Joe?"

"I feel more energized than when we started. This morning I was beginning to lose hope. I felt trapped, looking over the edge. Now I can see that I have achieved a lot throughout my career," Joe admits.

Richard smiles warmly. Leaning towards Joe, he lowers his voice and asks, "What makes a business successful: focusing on fixing problems and weaknesses or focusing on company strengths and opportunities?"

Joe considers the question for 30 seconds. "Probably both," he replies.

"Exactly!" continues Richard, "and what percentage of your time and that of your team is focused on the company's problems, as opposed to its core capabilities and opportunities?"

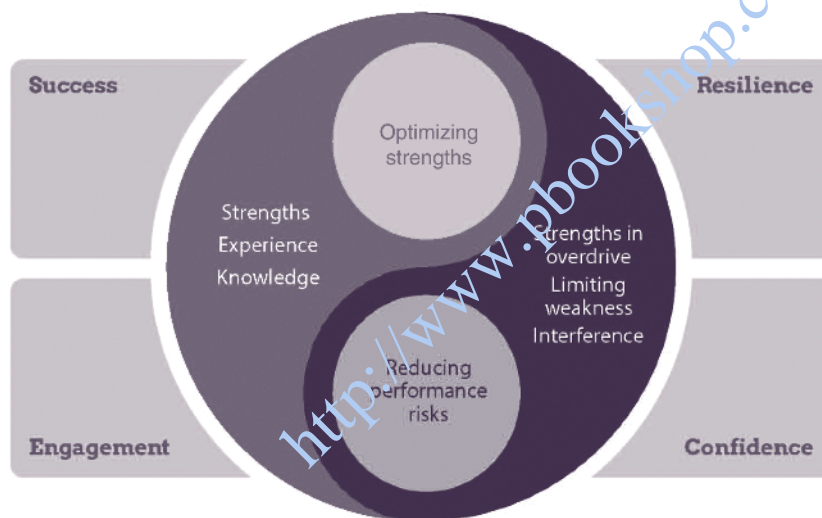
"We definitely spend the majority of our time talking about issues and risks to the business," Joe admits without hesitation.

"So, let's imagine you switch this focus to spend 80% of your time and effort on your core strengths and opportunities as a leader and those

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of your team and the larger organization. The remaining 20% of your time can be focused on reducing weaker areas and other performance risks,” Richard suggests.

“Really, it’s all about ensuring the right balance, Joe. Research shows that if you spend the majority of your time and energy focusing on your strengths, knowledge and experience, optimizing your productive habits, and the remainder reducing performance risks, you will grow in terms of resilience, confidence and engagement, which in turn leads to achieving results,” Richard explains with the help of a slide he swipes onto his screen.³



Positive Balance

“But we can’t do that. We have too many problems at the moment!” protests Joe, rubbing the back of his neck and looking down at the

³ See Appendix, The Stretch Toolbox, 1.3. Positive Balance.

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notes he has been making. “And what do you mean by ‘performance risks’? I remember you using this term on the plane as well,” he adds.

“Performance risks are things that limit or get in the way of progress. There are three main types.

1. Limiting weaknesses – things that you’re not good at and don’t enjoy but which, if not done, may stop progress
2. Strengths in overdrive – things that you do enjoy and that you are good at but which, if overused or used in the wrong way or at the wrong time, can lead to negative outcomes
3. Other sources of interference – both those that come from yourself (such as being overly reliant on yourself or low self-confidence) and those that come from external sources (such as the company culture or the leadership style of its executives).

“Anyway, back to my original question, Joe: what if you were to spend 80% of your time and effort focusing on strengths and 20% focusing on reducing weaker areas and performance risks?” Richard asks.

He remains silent waiting for Joe to look up again. As Joe does, Richard meets his eyes and holds his gaze. Joe realizes that Richard is inviting him to reconsider what he has just said.

“Well, perhaps we can do both... I am starting to see that giving more attention to our strengths and opportunities might be really beneficial to get us off this precipice,” contemplates Joe, rubbing the back of his neck again.

“Indeed,” affirms Richard. “To get a team performing at the top of their game, it is important to focus on individual and collective strengths. Understanding and clearly communicating your own and your

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business's values, aspirations and abilities are vital too. The point where these four things meet is where you will find your leadership edge. The point at which the business's strengths, values, aspirations and abilities meet is where you'll find the key to this business's expansion too. We will explore this in detail at our next session."

"Woah! Slow down," interrupts Joe, leaning back in his chair, both hands behind his head. He is clearly irritated. "I am really concerned that we do not just ignore our weaknesses. And what about our failures? I know I've learned so much from mine. Surely reviewing failure – and lessons learned – is important? You seem to be navigating totally away from this. In fact, this is beginning to sound increasingly unrealistic. And like it's going to take forever," puffs Joe, rolling up his sleeves.

"My strengths, their strengths, values, aspirations and habits. Hell, Richard, I've not got time for all this. And what about experience and my team's ability to do the job? Isn't the experience and skills each one of them brings to the business just as important as this stuff? I've a business to run here you know, Richard. I haven't even got time to work out where to start!" Joe vents as he gets up from his chair and walks over to the window.

"Yes, Joe, I know. This *will* help you run your business. Just think about it for a minute. What will happen if you continue down the path you are currently on? You described to me earlier a culture of mistrust and pessimism. I can see that the culture here tends to focus on short-term wins rather than long-term successes. It is clear that your energy level, and their energy levels," Richard gestures towards the glass partition to the open plan office, "are not high. You've described to me all their – and your – shortcomings. You also said that talking about your

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successes and your strengths made you feel more ‘energized’. That it made you feel less trapped, like there were more choices, right?” he asks.

“Right,” replies Joe.

“Sure, people can learn a lot from failure and mistakes, but this is only half of the picture, Joe – they also learn a lot from doing new stuff, expanding their experience into areas where they are less comfortable. This is something that every leader needs to grasp to avoid getting stuck and limiting the potential of not just themselves but their team and, indeed, their organization.”

“So, your first choice, Joe, is whether you want to get back into a more positive mindset, or stay in your current fixed mindset, keeping on a path that is inevitably going to limit you?”

“Before you answer, think about where your resistance is coming from. Is it just that you have got used to thinking in terms of failures and weaknesses, of fixing what’s broken, rather than sharpening what’s already great? Is it because you’ve been going down this path for so long that you’ve run out of steam and are unable to create choices? Where is this path going to lead you? And your team?” Richard concludes, pointing towards Joe’s colleagues.

“As to where to start, I’m mailing you a link to an online strengths profiling tool, called Strengthscope360TM. I’m sending you a user name and a password too so you can access the tool. If you take around 20 minutes to do this, we can prepare an in-depth strengths profile, which will help you understand your strengths as well as giving you feedback from your colleagues about how they view your

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strengths. The profile will help you to better understand your leadership style. It will suggest ways to up your contribution to this business by, for example, making the most of your strengths and your energy levels and practising the leadership habits we spoke about earlier.

“At our next session we’ll review your profile, see what it tells us about you and look at how you can begin to share your vision of what this organization is capable of becoming. We’ll also look at how to take the edge off any performance risks that may result from failing to manage any of those weaknesses you are concerned about. OK?”

“Sure,” replies Joe half-heartedly, his mind already reflecting on the question Richard has just posed about where he’ll end up if he stays on his current path. He knows he doesn’t want to carry on as before but he is not yet convinced that he, or his organization, are ready to be stretched in these new ways.

“That’s OK but I’m not happy signing up to a retainer contract with you yet. I want to see if this stuff works before committing. Can we come to a compromise, Richard?” he continues after a pause.

“What sort of a compromise, Joe?” asks an amused Richard.

“Well, can we trial this approach? Can I commit to, say, three meetings, and we review if it’s working before committing to the six months?”

“Sure, Joe. We’ll focus on identifying goals and getting some quick wins over the next six weeks. You’ll soon see why this approach works,” Richard reassures Joe. “One of the first positive patterns of behaviour to start purposefully practising is to complete a Learning Journal at the end of each session. Here’s a journal. Just jot down the key things you

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learned today and find some time during the week to reflect on what you write,” Richard concludes as he hands over a notebook to Joe, in which Joe is pleased to see copies of the models Richard introduced him to during the session.

“Yes, Sir!” jokes Joe.

“Great!” smiles Richard, closing up his laptop and getting ready to leave.

Having said goodbye to Richard, Joe returns to his office. He has a call scheduled with his solicitor to talk about divorce proceedings.

“Remembering my successes did feel good. I wish Lynette would remember what I did right as well as what I did wrong,” he reflects as he accepts the call.

**Joe's Learning Journal entry**

1. Maybe there's a different way to think about leading than the "fix it" attitude I've become used to. Focusing too much on given boundaries, weaknesses and failure may limit growth. A more positive mindset may help me to better engage stakeholders and get lasting success. I need to challenge my beliefs and weed out the unhealthy, self-limiting ones. I need to replace them with more positive, solutions-focused beliefs.
2. First, I need to understand more about my strengths and align these with my values, aspirations and abilities to find what makes me unique as a leader.

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3. Then I need to change some of my behaviours to help me adopt the four habits Richard says are common to great leaders: sharing vision; sparking engagement; skilfully executing; and sustaining progress. This will lead to improved performance all round.
4. Staying positive will, hopefully, help me and the organization to succeed, but only time will tell.

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