

**How to Rewire Your Brain
for Leadership and
Personal Excellence
Without Adding to
Your Schedule**

the mindfulness**edge**

matt tenney **tim gard, phd**

WILEY

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PREFACE



A NOTE ON BEST ENJOYING THIS BOOK

Please don't be intimidated by the subtitle of this book, or by the fact that the coauthor is a super genius neuroscientist who has worked at leading research institutions, including Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School. The main text, which is in my voice, will not delve deeply into neuroscience and is a fairly easy and highly practical read.

Although I'll mention quite a bit of research and shed some light on the latest understanding of how we can rewire our brains for leadership excellence, the more in-depth discussions of neuroscience research, and other interesting studies, are set aside from the main text in sections called "Neuro Notes." If you'd like to go a bit deeper with the neuroscience for your own education, or so you can sound cool at dinner parties, or just to add to the enjoyment of the book, I encourage you to read the Neuro Notes. If you don't think the extra scientific depth is necessary, you can skip the Neuro Notes and stick with the main text without fear of losing the main thrust of the book.

The Neuro Notes are written by the aforementioned super genius neuroscientist, Tim Gard, PhD. In addition to writing the Neuro Notes, Dr. Gard has been instrumental in finding the most recent, relevant research for this book. He also worked with me on the main text to help improve it in many ways, including ensuring that I didn't overstate the results of the research we cite in this book.

Dr. Gard has helped improve this book significantly. I believe that, thanks to him, you will enjoy the book significantly more than if I had written it alone and that you'll walk away with a much greater understanding of your brain and your power to change it in ways that can help you achieve both leadership and personal excellence.

INTRODUCTION



Think of all the simple activities that you already engage in every day—activities such as brushing your teeth, getting dressed, commuting to work, walking to your desk, waiting for the coffee to brew, waiting for your computer to boot up, and so on. These activities are often labeled as “downtime” or “wastes of time.”

Now, imagine that you could transform those activities into some of the most productive moments of the day, while also increasing your happiness. Cutting-edge research in neuroscience suggests that you can actually do just that.

This book is about a simple tool that can help you:

- Improve your business acumen
- Improve your emotional and social intelligence
- Become more innovative
- Manage change more effectively
- See opportunities that other people don't see
- Improve your leadership presence
- Live a more fulfilling life

I know it may sound too good to be true, but the tool we'll discuss in this book can help you do all of the above. In fact, it gets even better.

This tool is absolutely free, and it doesn't require you to add anything to your schedule, which is likely quite full already. All you need to do is change the way you do things you're already doing every day. It takes about as much effort as taking a pill, but you can apply this tool every waking moment of your life. And, when practiced correctly, the side

effects include only positive things, such as increased happiness and improved health.

The tool to which I'm referring is a simple practice known as mindfulness training.¹



EVERYTHING BEGINS IN THE MIND

Over the last couple of years, during workshops and training programs I've offered, I've asked thousands of people the following question: "Would you agree with me when I say that all success and all failure originate in the mind?"

No one has ever disagreed. The question is essentially rhetorical. We know that everything we do, or fail to do, begins in the mind.

The reason I ask the question above is because it makes the next question much more powerful: "How many people do you know who take time every day to intentionally train the mind to function more effectively?"

Typically, in business audiences, only 1 to 3 percent of the people raise their hands.

I find this quite interesting. Everyone seems to agree that an effectively functioning mind is the root of all personal and professional success, yet very few people take time each day to intentionally train their minds. We might add knowledge through study, but we don't do anything to train how the mind actually functions. In most cases, this is because people are not aware that a systematic process of training the mind exists, a method of training that is being applied at highly successful companies, such as Google, Apple, Aetna, Intel, General Mills, and many others.

For most of us, unfortunately, the result of not training the mind is that it can be our greatest obstacle to success. It is often a source of anxiety, self-doubt, and repetitive thought patterns that limit us, keeping us from reaching our full potential.

This book offers several radical paradigm shifts. The first broad shift is that we all have the ability to train our minds in such a way that reverses the situation described above. We can transform the mind so that it is no

longer our greatest obstacle to success but, rather, an incredibly powerful tool that allows us to achieve significantly greater success in both our personal and our professional lives, especially as leaders.



YOU CAN REWIRE YOUR BRAIN FOR LEADERSHIP AND PERSONAL EXCELLENCE

It would have been nearly impossible 20 years ago to find a neuroscientist who believed that the physical structure of the human brain could be changed after adolescence. Today, this view is quite different. In 2004, for instance, a neuroscientist named Bogdan Draganski and his colleagues showed that people who have trained in juggling for three months develop measurably more gray matter²—the switchboard substance of the brain, so to speak—in brain regions that are associated with the processing and storage of complex visual motion.^{3,4}

There is now a whole new focus of neuroscience growing around the fact that the brain can be changed, which is referred to as *neuroplasticity*. One of the most promising discoveries in the realm of neuroplasticity is that we can change our brains throughout our entire lives. An old dog really can learn new tricks!

Neuro Note 0.1: Neuroplasticity

Several studies, such as the juggling study above by Draganski and colleagues, clearly show that we can change the physical structure of our brains—in essence, gray matter increases—and that brain and behavior are closely related. However, it is difficult to say with precision which of the very tiny structures that make up gray matter are changing. Animal studies suggest that these changes are due to the growth of tiny blood vessels (capillaries) that supply the neurons with oxygen and glucose, to increases in dendritic length and branching, to a growth of the number of synapses, and even to the growth of new neurons.⁵

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In addition to increasing gray matter, training can also increase white matter, the wiring of the brain. This was revealed for the first time by Scholz, Klein, and colleagues, who found increases in white matter after only six weeks of juggling training.⁶ As with the gray matter, it is not clear yet what exactly at the micro level causes this increase.

If you'd like a more detailed explanation about what white and gray matter are, how we measure changes in brain function and structure, and an overview of the brain regions involved in mindfulness, please see the Appendix.

The aspect of neuroplasticity that I find most exciting is the more recent discovery that we can actually change the physical structure of the brain simply by using the mind.⁷ One of the first studies to shed light on the possibility of changing the brain simply by using the mind involved taxi drivers in London, England. As part of their exams for obtaining a license to drive a cab in London, they must acquire what is known as “the Knowledge.” They are required to memorize routes in an area that includes roughly 25,000 streets and 20,000 landmarks and places of interest. Acquiring “the Knowledge” can take two to four years of training.

In 2011, when Woollett and Maguire, neuroscientists at University College London, studied the brains of a group of London cab drivers before and after acquiring “the Knowledge,” they discovered a significant increase in gray matter in the area of the brain associated with spatial memory (the posterior hippocampi). No such changes have been found in those trainees who failed to qualify as licensed London taxi drivers and a control group who did not go through the training.⁸

As the practice of mindfulness has become more widespread, the scientific community has become increasingly interested in mindfulness training, and a tremendous amount of research has been compiled on the benefits of the practice.⁹ There are now numerous studies that strongly suggest that mindfulness training results in physical changes to the structure of the brain—in some cases as quickly as eight weeks—that

can be linked to better leadership skills.¹⁰ In this book we'll explore how, with mindfulness training, we can literally rewire our brains for leadership excellence.¹¹



WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS BOOK

This book is based on a combination of previously separate training programs that I have offered to leaders. I understand that oftentimes the most pressing issue in an organization is the financial situation. There can be tremendous pressure to “hit the numbers” every single quarter.

Thus, we start by discussing how mindfulness training can help leaders make decisions that have better impacts on gross margins and expenses. This helps us make quick, direct impacts on the bottom line, which means we're more likely to keep our jobs long enough to make a long-term impact. Better business acumen also allows a leader to have more resources available to serve both the customer and the members of the organization.

However, as I explored in great detail in my first book, *Serve to Be Great*, if leaders place too much emphasis on the numbers and fail to serve and care for the people on their teams effectively, the organization will eventually fail. Without happy, loyal team members, it is nearly impossible to keep happy, loyal customers. Without happy, loyal customers, an organization simply can't exist for long. Therefore, we also need to address the leadership skills that allow us to create and sustain a culture that drives the long-term growth and profitability of our organizations.

Fortunately, there is a bridge between better business acumen and better leadership skills. The bridge is the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness training helps us develop the self-awareness and mental agility that are the keys to better business acumen and the foundation for developing the emotional and social intelligence that allow us to serve and care for the people on our teams more effectively, and thus create sustainable, high-performance team cultures.

The book is divided into two parts to make it easy to approach the topics we'll discuss:

Part 1—We'll introduce and explain mindfulness training and how it can rewire our brains in ways that help us achieve greater success as leaders. We'll discuss how mindfulness training can help leaders make a quick, direct, positive impact on gross margins and expenses. We'll also explore how mindfulness training helps us develop the leadership skills that are essential for the long-term success of our teams.

Part 2—We'll discuss how to integrate mindfulness training seamlessly into our daily lives without having to add anything new to our already-busy schedules.

We sincerely hope that you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed writing it!

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PART 1



HOW MINDFULNESS TRAINING REWIRES THE BRAIN FOR LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE