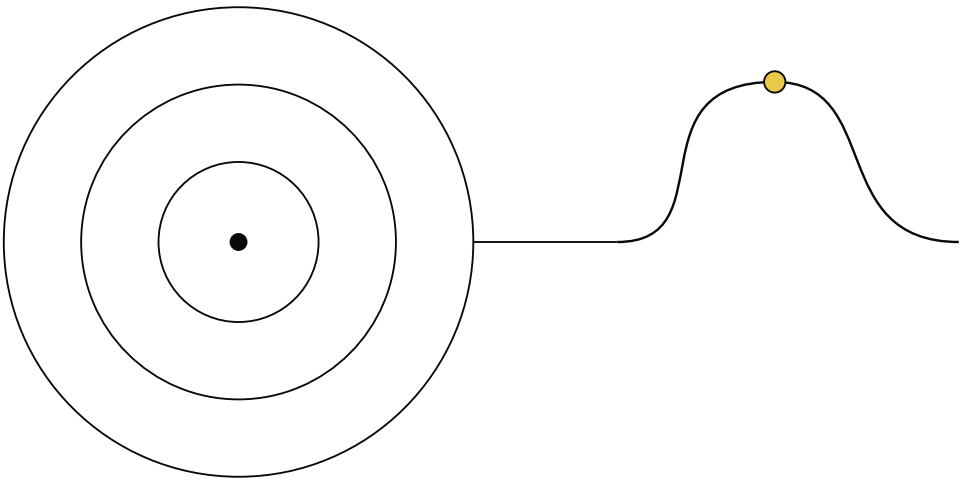
A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CEOS, EXECUTIVES & ENTREPRENEURS

The Executive Mental Performance Toolkit

7 practical mental skills to think clearly, make better decisions and perform under pressure.



NOTICE **CHOOSE** **ACT**

Harri Pereira

Mental Performance Coach and Founder of MindsetX

START HERE

Choose the skill for the moment.

Scan the situations below. Pick the one most relevant today, turn to that page and use the exercise on a real decision, conversation or commitment.

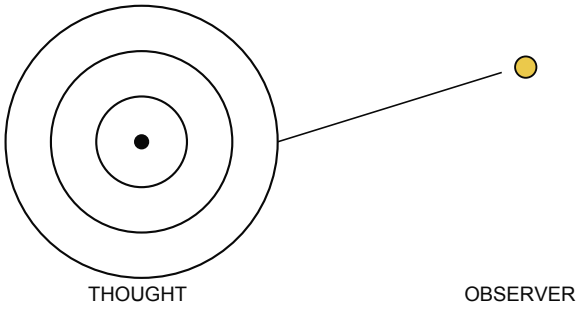
01	I'm caught in my own version of events. **Metacognition**	03
02	My attention keeps getting pulled elsewhere. **Attentional Control**	04
03	I'm reacting before I have thought it through. **Emotional Regulation**	05
04	A thought is stopping me from taking a useful step. **Cognitive Flexibility**	06
05	I know what to do, but I am not following through. **Behavioural Self-Regulation**	07
06	The stakes are high and I feel underprepared. **Pressure Management**	08
07	Work is finished, but my mind is still there. **Psychological Recovery**	09

Make it a practice. Start with one skill. Repeat it in the same kind of situation for seven days, then review what changed. Use the commitment on page 10.

SKILL 01

Metacognition

Think About Your Thinking



What would I advise someone else to do here?

Your first interpretation can feel like the whole truth. Looking at the situation as an observer helps you check your assumptions before you act.

PRACTICE / THIRD-PERSON SELF-TALK 3 MINUTES

1. **Name the situation.** Use your own name: “Alex is frustrated because a senior colleague has missed another commitment.”
2. **Take the adviser's view.** What would you tell Alex if you cared about both the relationship and the standard of work?
3. **Test the assumptions.** What does Alex know? What is Alex inferring about the colleague's motives or capability?
4. **Choose the next action.** Write one reasonable step Alex can take, then put it in the diary.

IN YOUR WORK

Before speaking to an underperforming senior colleague, separate the missed commitment from your assumptions about their intent. Ask what happened, restate the standard and agree a specific next step.

LEADERSHIP EXAMPLE / RAY DALIO

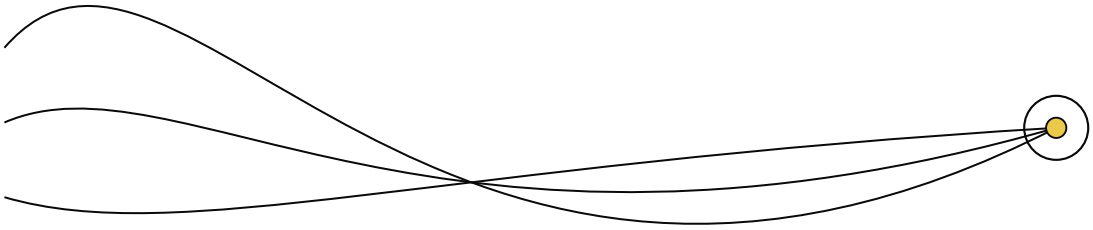
Bridgewater founder Ray Dalio writes “Pain + Reflection = Progress.” He recommends reflecting on mistakes and weaknesses. When something goes wrong, examine your own judgement as well as the other person's actions. [L1]

RESEARCH / Kross et al. (2014): non-first-person self-talk and self-distancing. [R1]

SKILL 02

Attentional Control

Direct Your Attention Deliberately



WANDER NOTICE RETURN

Where does my attention need to return?

Attention will wander. The skill is noticing where it has gone and deliberately bringing it back. Practise that return before you need it in a demanding meeting.

PRACTICE / FOCUSED-ATTENTION TRAINING 3 MINUTES

1. **Set a three-minute timer.** Sit comfortably, place your feet on the floor and let your breathing remain natural.
2. **Choose one anchor.** Notice the sensation of breathing at your nostrils or the movement of your abdomen.
3. **Notice the distraction.** When a thought, sound or urge pulls you away, briefly acknowledge it without following it.
4. **Return deliberately.** Bring attention back to the next breath. Repeat each time it wanders; returning is the practice.

IN YOUR WORK

Before reviewing a proposal, do the practice and define one question the document must answer. When you notice yourself checking messages, return to that question.

SPORTING ANALOGY / THE NEXT SHOT

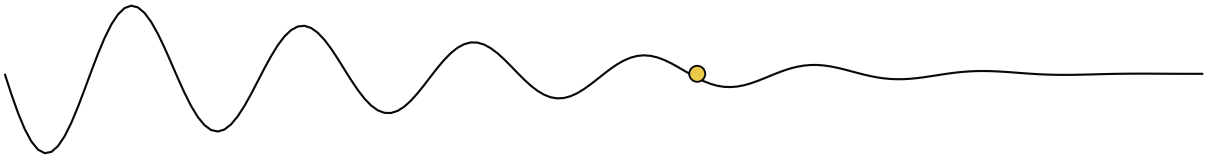
Elite golfers use consistent pre-shot routines to prepare for the shot in front of them. Before your next meeting, take a moment to pause and name the one thing you need to focus on. [S1]

RESEARCH / Lutz et al. (2008): focused attention and monitoring in meditation. [R2]

SKILL 03

Emotional Regulation

Influence Your Response



What else could this situation mean?

A challenge to your strategy can feel like a challenge to your competence. Reappraisal means finding another plausible interpretation, so you can respond to the situation more deliberately.

PRACTICE / COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL 3 MINUTES

1. **Catch the reaction.** Name the emotion and what you feel pulled to do: defend, interrupt, withdraw or attack.
2. **Identify the interpretation.** Write the meaning you have attached: “They are undermining me in front of the team.”
3. **Generate two alternatives.** Perhaps they see a risk you have missed, or need more context. Check these possibilities against the facts.
4. **Choose a useful response.** Ask a clarifying question, acknowledge a valid concern and decide what needs to happen next.

IN YOUR WORK

When a colleague challenges your strategy, ask: “Which assumption concerns you most?” Evaluate the substance before deciding whether to change course or hold the line.

LEADERSHIP EXAMPLE / SATYA NADELLA

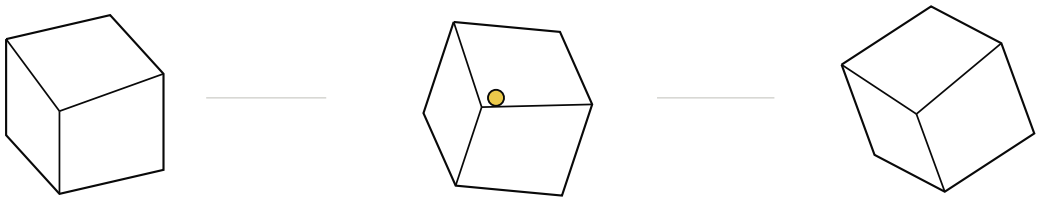
Satya Nadella encouraged a shift from “know-it-all” to “learn-it-all” at Microsoft. A challenge to your thinking may contain useful information. Ask what you can learn from it before defending your position. [L2]

RESEARCH / Gross (1998): changing appraisal can change emotional responding. [R3]

SKILL 04

Cognitive Flexibility

Change Your Relationship With Thoughts



ONE THOUGHT

MORE THAN ONE VIEW

What could I do even with this thought present?

“I am not ready” can stop you from taking an opportunity. Defusion helps you recognise that thought without automatically treating it as a fact or an instruction.

PRACTICE / COGNITIVE DEFUSION 2 MINUTES

1. **Catch the thought.** Write the sentence holding you back, exactly as it appears: “I am not ready for this opportunity.”
2. **Change the wording.** Say: “I'm having the thought that I am not ready for this opportunity.”
3. **Notice the distinction.** You are noticing a thought. What facts, risks and resources do you need to consider?
4. **Choose your next step.** You can still feel uncertain and do something useful: ask a question, prepare or test the opportunity on a small scale.

IN YOUR WORK

Before rejecting a new opportunity, identify any preparation you need and one small action you can take today. Consider the evidence alongside the doubt.

LEADERSHIP EXAMPLE / JEFF BEZOS

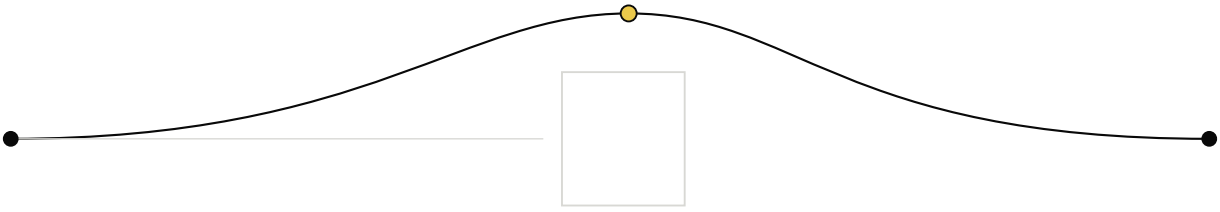
In his 2016 shareholder letter, Jeff Bezos described backing an Amazon Studios project despite his reservations. You can commit to a decision without feeling certain about it, then review what happens. [L3]

RESEARCH / Hayes et al. (2006): defusion within psychological flexibility and ACT. [R4]

SKILL 05

Behavioural Self-Regulation

Follow Through on Intentions



What will I do when my usual obstacle appears?

You can intend to delegate and still take the task back when you feel uncertain. WOOP helps you identify what is likely to get in your way and decide how you will respond.

PRACTICE / WOOP: WISH, OUTCOME, OBSTACLE, PLAN 5 MINUTES

1. **Wish.** Choose an important, feasible objective for the next seven days: “Delegate the client proposal properly.”
2. **Outcome.** Imagine the best result and why it matters: your colleague owns the work and you protect strategic time.
3. **Obstacle.** Identify what inside you may interfere: “When I feel uncertain, I take the task back.”
4. **Plan.** Link that cue to an action: “If I feel the urge to take over, then I will ask for their recommendation before offering mine.”

IN YOUR WORK

Before delegating, agree the outcome, who can decide what and when you will review progress. Use your plan when you want to take over. Step in if agreed limits on cost, quality or timing are crossed.

LEADERSHIP EXAMPLE / REED HASTINGS

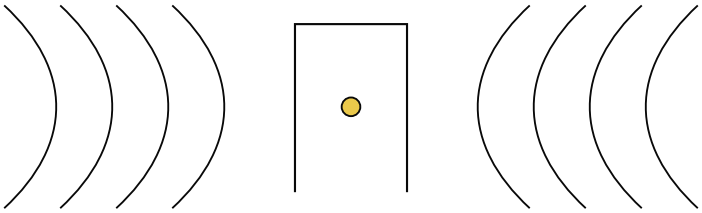
Reed Hastings published Netflix's original culture deck. Its evolving culture memo emphasises giving people context and responsibility for decisions. Before handing over a decision, make sure the person has the information and authority to make it. [L4]

RESEARCH / Oettingen & Gollwitzer's work informs WOOP; see protocol and MCII review. [R5, R6]

SKILL 06

Pressure Management

Perform When the Stakes Rise



ANTICIPATE REHEARSE RESPOND

Have I rehearsed the difficult moment, or just success?

A pitch rarely goes exactly as planned. Rehearse the tough question or interruption, as well as your opening, so you have practised what to do when things become difficult.

PRACTICE / MENTAL REHEARSAL UNDER PRESSURE 5 MINUTES

1. **Choose a real situation.** Picture an upcoming board meeting, pitch or difficult conversation. Define what effective performance looks like.
2. **Introduce one challenge.** Imagine a tough question, an interruption or a moment when you lose your train of thought.
3. **Rehearse your response.** Picture yourself pausing, listening and answering the question. Practise admitting what you do not yet know.
4. **Practise aloud.** Say your opening and one difficult answer. Repeat with a different challenge, then note one improvement.

IN YOUR WORK

Before a board meeting, rehearse: “I don't have that figure here. I will confirm it by 3pm.” Then practise returning to the decision the board needs to make.

SPORTING ANALOGY / PRACTISE THE SCENARIO

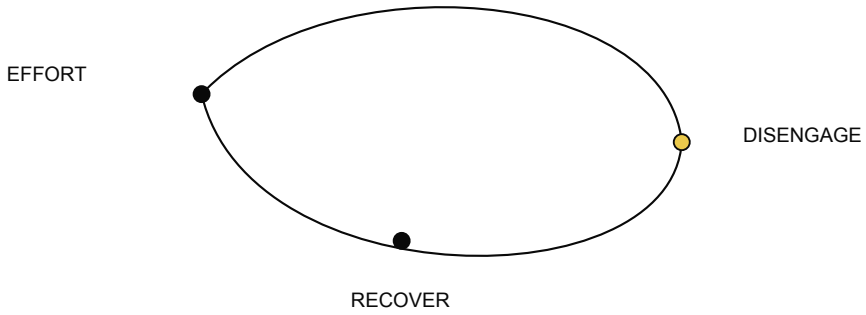
The US Olympic & Paralympic Committee includes rehearsing competitive scenarios and coping strategies in its mental-performance work. You can do the same before a difficult meeting: imagine what might happen, then practise your response. [S2]

RESEARCH / Adapted from Meichenbaum's coping-skills rehearsal principles, not a full SIT protocol. [R7]

SKILL 07

Psychological Recovery

Restore Your Capacity to Perform



What needs a plan so my mind can let it rest?

Unfinished work can stay on your mind long after you have stopped working. Write down what you will do next and when you will do it, then give yourself a clear end to the working day.

PRACTICE / UNFINISHED-TASK CLOSURE 5 MINUTES

1. **List the unfinished work.** Write down the tasks most likely to stay on your mind this evening. Keep them in one list.
2. **Define the next action.** Replace “sort the budget” with something concrete, such as “check the revised forecast with the finance lead”.
3. **Schedule the return.** Record when and where you will resume. If something is urgent, give someone responsibility and agree when they should contact you.
4. **Finish and switch off.** Review the plan, close your work tools and do something away from work: walk, exercise or spend time with someone without checking messages.

IN YOUR WORK

At the end of a demanding day, put tomorrow's first action in the diary. If the task resurfaces that evening, remind yourself where the plan is and when you will return to it.

LEADERSHIP EXAMPLE / ARIANNA HUFFINGTON

Arianna Huffington says her 2007 collapse from exhaustion led her to change how she worked and later found Thrive Global. Plan time away from work before exhaustion makes the decision for you. [L5]

RESEARCH / Smit (2016): planning unfinished goals helped workers who struggled to detach. [R8]

PUT IT TO WORK

One skill.
Seven days of practice.

Choose the situation where a small change in how you think or respond would make the greatest difference. Practise one skill there before adding another.

THE SITUATION I WILL USE IT IN

THE SKILL AND RESPONSE I WILL PRACTISE

WHAT I WILL OBSERVE: A DECISION, ACTION OR RESPONSE

Review after seven days: When did I use it? What did I do differently? What needs adjusting? Judge the behaviour you can observe, not how motivated you felt.

Let's look at what's getting in the way.

If the same difficulty keeps affecting your decisions, leadership or execution, let's look at what is driving it. On a one-to-one strategy call, we'll work through where you are getting stuck and agree practical next steps.

> **Book a One-to-One Strategy Call**
> calendly.com/mindsetx/strategy

A one-to-one conversation with Harri Pereira about your performance and what to do next.

"For me that was improving lifestyle and health choices as well as embedding behaviours that helped me find mental clarity and focus."

FOR THE CURIOUS

The thinking behind the tools.

These exercises adapt established ideas for workplace use. The leadership examples illustrate related principles; they do not establish use of these exact techniques. Research findings come from specific settings, not a validation of this toolkit as a whole.

RESEARCH

R1 / Kross et al. (2014)
Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: how you do it matters. *JPSP*, 106(2), 304-324. doi:10.1037/a0035173.
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R2 / Lutz et al. (2008)
Attention regulation and monitoring in meditation. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12(4), 163-169.
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R3 / Gross (1998)
Antecedent- and response-focused emotion regulation. *JPSP*, 74(1), 224-237. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.74.1.224.
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R4 / Hayes et al. (2006)
Acceptance and commitment therapy: model, processes and outcomes. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44(1), 1-25.
pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

R5 / Oettingen / WOOP
Official Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan protocol. Mental contrasting is paired with Gollwitzer's if-then planning.
woopmylife.org

R6 / Wang, Wang & Gai (2021)
Meta-analysis of mental contrasting with implementation intentions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 565202.
pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

R7 / Meichenbaum (1985)
Stress Inoculation Training. Pergamon Press. Coping skills, rehearsal and application; author's publication record.
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R8 / Smit (2016)
Successfully leaving work at work. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 89, 493-514. doi:10.1111/joop.12137.
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LEADERSHIP & SPORT

L1 / Ray Dalio / Principles
“Pain + Reflection = Progress.” Reflection on mistakes and weaknesses.
principles.com

L2 / Microsoft (2020)
Official Microsoft Blog, 14 May: Nadella's emphasis on learning rather than knowing.
blogs.microsoft.com

L3 / Jeff Bezos / Amazon
2016 Letter to Shareholders: committing despite reservations about a Studios project.
aboutamazon.com

L4 / Netflix / Culture memo
Context over control; decision ownership. Netflix's 24 June 2024 update credits Hastings with the original 2009 deck.
jobs.netflix.com · 2024 update

L5 / Arianna Huffington
First-person account of her 2007 collapse and the motivation for founding Thrive Global.
community.thriveglobal.com

S1 / PGA of America (2019)
Building a Routine. Professional golfers' preparation before each shot.
pga.com

S2 / USOPC / Mental Performance
Imagery and mental rehearsal include competitive scenarios and coping strategies.
usopc.org

W1 / MindsetX / Client testimonial
Matt Ashley: exact quotation and role as published on the MindsetX website. Accessed 26 October 2026.
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