

JAKE BREEDEN

TIPPING SACRED COWS

Kick the Bad Work Habits that
MASQUERADE AS VIRTUES



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that Masquerade as Virtues

Jake Breeden

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1

Meet Your Sacred Cows

I get paid to do my two favorite things: travel and teach. I love my work. Over the past ten years I've been to twenty-seven countries, working with some really smart, successful leaders at exciting companies. But there's something I love even more than my job — Emily, Clara, and Margaret, my three daughters.

I go into withdrawal if it's been too long since I've seen them. And there's one absolutely sacrosanct rule for me: never miss a birthday. Despite the intensity of my international travel, I made it through my oldest daughter Emily's first twelve years, my middle daughter Clara's first nine years, and my youngest daughter Margaret's first five years without ever missing a birthday, a perfect twenty-six for twenty-six. And then came Clara's tenth birthday.

I had to teach a two-week leadership development program in Dubai. I hated it, but I decided teaching the program and missing Clara's birthday was the only responsible thing to do. I sat down with her to discuss what I could do to make amends, knowing this was a negotiation I was bound to lose. I showed up with a heart full of guilt, ready to do whatever it took to placate my middle child. "Clara, I'm going to be out of the country for your birthday," I said.

“My double-digit birthday?” she asked.

“Yes,” I swallowed. “That one.”

And then came the sobs. I hugged her. “Daddy?” she asked through muffled tears. “Will you do anything I ask you to, to make up for missing my double-digit birthday?”

I hesitated before asking a dangerous question: “What do you want?”

“Daddy,” she said, drying her big blue eyes as she pulled away from me. “I want you to promise me that you’ll miss Emily’s thirteenth birthday.”

I had expected to be looking into the price of Justin Bieber tickets. I was ready to give Clara something special, not take away something special from her sister.

Clara said I should miss Emily’s birthday “because it’s fair.” I was missing a special birthday for her, and I needed to make up for that by missing a special birthday for Emily. The way to make amends was to even the score.

Unwilling to start an endless chain reaction of missed birthdays, I took Clara to a theme park—one of her favorite and my least favorite things to do. When I stepped off the roller coaster quivering with nausea, Clara finally felt the score was even. Someone had to pay, and that someone was me.

None of us wants to be treated unfairly. From our earliest days, we, like Clara, have a sense that life should be fair and we protest or seethe when it’s not. To even the scales, we demand something for ourselves. Failing that, we deny something for others. To be sure, fairness is a virtue, but when it’s a virtue that trumps reason, it can backfire.

As it turns out, Clara’s response was not unlike the typical responses of well-meaning adults. When they waste precious emotional energy fretting over relative office size, bonus packages, or mentions at the annual meeting, or when they demand that a junior employee go through the same trivial, grunt work and dreadful schedule that they did, even if there’s a better way, leaders make the same mistake as Clara. Sometimes worrying about who gets more than their fair share is a lot like tearfully asking your father to miss your sister’s birthday.

Fairness is only one of several leadership virtues whose pursuit can reap unintended, injurious consequences. The truth is that many workplace values that seem beyond reproach actually do hidden damage. These are values that on the one hand give us life and direction, and on the other hand can steal our energy, effectiveness, and success. Like rocks in a river channel, these unexamined values can get in our way, impede our efforts, and even capsize us. Some leaders, however, become fully aware and steadily mindful of the downsides of their and their companies' most cherished and unquestioned virtues, and, in the process, renew their spirits, get more done, and enjoy more success.

Unexamined Virtues at Work

No detail escaped Julian Fletcher's watchful eye. As the COO of a small but growing consulting firm, he counted every penny, balanced every budget, and demanded that his employees operate with the same ruthless efficiency. And though Julian was successful in his role, he was often frustrated by the cavalier attitude of his boss, the CEO. When the CEO was recruited away to run a larger firm, Julian was promoted to the top position, and without wasting a second, he eagerly set out to tighten the ship.

First, he eliminated several client entertainment events at expensive restaurants. Next, he ended the firm's policy of giving away free consulting to prospective clients. Then, he slashed the firm's liberal expense policy and stopped the practice of wooing new recruits with large bonuses.

At first, Julian's results were impressive. The company's costs dropped, which in turn made profits rise. But over the next several months, signs of damage emerged. Clients and employees began to disengage. A few workers jumped ship to other companies. No new clients signed on, deals from existing clients began to dry up, and the flow of talented new hires ceased. By the end of Julian's first year, profits began to sink.

In an act of near mutiny, a few of the firm's employees reached out to the former CEO, begging her to come back and offer Julian advice. Out

of loyalty to her former company and colleagues, she agreed. And out of desperation, Julian reluctantly acquiesced to meet with his former boss.

“Julian,” she said, “when you took over after I left, the company was growing rapidly in spite of some obvious inefficiencies. You acted with the best of intentions as you tried to eliminate some of the waste you saw. But in the process of cutting the loss, you’ve also destroyed the growth. Now, the firm has gone from growing inefficiently to shrinking efficiently.”

Julian’s belief in efficiency was his sacred cow—a virtue he revered without question—and with good reason: it is a core business value, and he fostered it with zeal. Leaders like Julian often end up baffled. The very virtues that helped them succeed earlier in their career betray them as they move up the ladder. It’s smart to rely on your core beliefs at work. But thriving in the corporate world, in any role, requires the ability to recognize, on a personal level, when your greatest assets turn into career-limiting liabilities. On the organizational level, successful leadership requires being able to see when unexamined virtues have actually become, or are masking, unsuspected vices.

My own understanding of the unintended consequences of conventional workplace wisdom is grounded in my experience working with executives all over the world and informed by surprising research in psychology and economics on how human nature, social norms, and corporate culture can all pull us toward the territory of unexamined virtues. A growing body of research indicates these supposed virtues can wreak havoc on the careers of leaders and the results of organizations. Experiments by economists in The Netherlands have demonstrated the dark side of fairness;¹ a French-Canadian psychology professor discovered how passion for work can become an unhealthy obsession;² and a political science professor researching the marksmanship of female marines showed how aiming for excellence can backfire.³

This book is based on a current and comprehensive understanding of the unintended consequences of conventional workplace wisdom. The insights and solutions I offer here are informed by my experience with executives all over the world, helping them discover and learn to

avoid some of the most common, destructive, and invisible ways that business virtues and values backfire. Because in the world of work, when virtue backfires, it can lower performance, waste time and energy, damage morale and retention, and ruin careers.

The Peril of Sacred Cows

My teaching travels have taken me throughout India, to Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, and elsewhere. Between leadership trainings, I've vacationed on the stunning beaches of the Indian resort town Goa. The first literary reference to Goa from the *Mahabharata* refers to the city as Gomanta, which means "region of cows."⁴ "Go" means cow in Sanskrit, the primary liturgical language of Hinduism. It's no surprise, then, that cows are plentiful in Goa.

Although I was warned about the cows beforehand, it still shocked me to see them milling slowly down busy streets, lovingly adorned in handmade necklaces and bright orange strings of marigolds. They roam leisurely until they are brought back to their homes at the end of each day to rest and provide for families. These cows, givers of milk, are literally sacred objects of sincere reverence. "Sacred cow" is a Western figure of speech that takes its cue from the literal holy cows of India. It's an idea, custom, or institution that has real virtue, but that we hold beyond question or criticism—often unreasonably so. In the workplace, the danger of sacred cows is that in not approaching them with a healthy dose of mindfulness, we become blind to the ways these virtues sometimes hurt us. We fail to learn from our mistakes, and we stay stuck. And sometimes we stray badly off course.

Powerful, often invisible behavioral, social, and cultural forces can cause leaders to espouse the infallible importance of unexamined virtues in their ascent to success. One of the mightiest of those forces is the advice passed down from successful leaders, who attribute their success to such virtues. Ask leaders what gave rise to their wins and they might point to their high standards. But Clay Christensen's research, starting with *The Innovator's Dilemma*, shows that sometimes "good

enough” is better than excellent.⁵ Other leaders celebrate collaborating with others effectively, but Morten Hansen, the U.C. Berkeley business professor who literally wrote the book on collaboration (called *Collaboration*), uses rigorous research to show that “collaboration can just as easily undermine performance.”⁶ Hansen’s tougher examination of success reveals the occasional but critical role of less obvious and celebrated factors like hunkering down to take care of your own work and being open and ready to act on good luck.

Senior executives with a short attention span who constantly scan for new stimuli and boldly bet their careers on new opportunities may accomplish great things in part because of their *lack* of focus and follow through. But rather than advise their people to behave in this way, they often advocate unrelenting focus and concentration on the task at hand. I don’t suggest the executives mean to mislead. Just as a bird isn’t an ornithologist, a leader isn’t a behavioral scientist. The best leaders don’t sit back and study their success—they’re too busy achieving it.

When Stephen Jay Gould died in 2002, *American Scientist* remembered him as “an extraordinary figure in paleontology and evolutionary biology . . . [who] initiated and shaped some of the most heated and productive debates of the second half of the 20th century.”⁷ Gould attacked human chauvinism, the tendency to view evolution as a long march from the simple to the complex, leading up to humanity as the apex of evolution. Gould called bullshit on this view and used a massive body of statistical evidence to question the prevailing notion that evolution is a systematic march of progress. Instead, he showed it’s more of a random, “drunkard’s walk.” Questioning the march of evolution toward complexity was the modern-day equivalent of Galileo suggesting that the sun doesn’t revolve around the earth. Galileo used data to show we’re not the center of the world, and Gould used data to show we’re not the point of evolution. Gould was a great tipper of sacred cows and I admire his courage and hard work to support his points of view with evidence. My favorite Gould quotation, from his book *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*, nicely sums up one of the key themes of *Tipping Sacred Cows*: “The most erroneous

stories are those we think we know best — and therefore never scrutinize or question.”⁸

Think about the stories you know best. There’s one story I imagine you know especially well: the story of how you got where you are. And you’ve probably shared some of the lessons of your stories with others, as teaching is a natural act of leadership. We tell ourselves — and each other — stories that explain our own progress through life so often that the lessons of those stories become our truth. I think it’s time to scrutinize and question those stories.

In addition to the well-meaning stories we tell ourselves, another trusted source pushes us to overvalue virtues like fairness — our brains. As reported in “The Sunny Side of Fairness,” an article from the April, 2008 *Psychological Science*, our brain’s reward circuitry is activated when we receive an offer we perceive to be fair.⁹ And scholars have shown how mirror neurons in the brain encourage primates, including us humans, to feel what others feel.¹⁰ We’re social animals programmed at a deep level to empathize, help each other, and generally ensure things end up fair. Helping others is indeed a real virtue reflecting a real human need. But not everyone wants what we want, and our brain can too easily be fooled. If you yearn for a little more attention and acclaim at work, your neural reward circuitry lights up when you give someone else attention and acclaim — even if the other person would prefer to be left alone. Your brain’s reward circuitry can’t peer into someone else’s brain. So we can confuse sameness with fairness and give others the rewards we seek. Or worse, we may even arbitrarily sabotage others to bring them down to our level, because it feels better for us to maintain a personal sense of justice.

Our own internal drives extend beyond fairness. We have, for example, a powerful, natural urge to finish tasks once we start them. Even when it might be wiser to abandon work, we have an urge to push through to completion. This phenomenon was established in a series of studies decades ago: nearly 100 percent of those tested in studies in the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s demonstrated a strong desire to return to interrupted tasks such as completing a puzzle.¹¹ Our natural desire to finish a task we start helps us see things through to the end, but it

hurts our ability to recognize the times when the smartest decision is to quit.

But it's not just the advice of well-intended leaders or the urges of our well-intended brains that cause us to fall into the trap of blindly following seemingly virtuous traits. The silent pull of our organization's culture also convinces smart leaders to blindly obey sacred cows. For example, when a company claims it values excellence in everything, the culture can inhibit exploration and quick prototyping. Or, if it's not safe to show and share half-baked ideas, the company misses out on some really great fully baked new ones. On the other hand, cultures that lionize creativity may shift a leader's focus away from pragmatic innovation toward newness for the sake of newness, or for the sake of ego and attention. And finally, a culture that idolizes balance may pull leaders to make bland compromises instead of standing for distinctive, meaningful work.

Let me be clear. I would *never* suggest that devout Hindus consider how tasty their beloved cows might be if they cooked and ate them. Similarly I don't suggest we kill conventional wisdom. The point of this book isn't to slaughter sacred cows. The point is to save them, and we do that by tipping them over and examining them. By understanding when and how to use our most heartfelt beliefs we can avoid their nasty unintended consequences. Julian Fletcher shouldn't stop being efficient — he needs to start being more sophisticated. He needs to raise his game so he understands how efficiency can harmonize with other complementary leadership traits he needs to nourish.

When leaders embrace beliefs without understanding and managing the potential side effects, the beliefs become sacred cows and get in the way. When leaders shut off their brains and blindly follow the bromides of conventional wisdom they set off a string of unintended consequences. I write this book because I have seen the same heartbreaking story play out too many times. Well-intended leaders, driven by deeply held beliefs, try to do the right thing — but the right thing backfires.

Business virtues help you most when they are used on purpose, not out of habit. With mindfulness and self-awareness, leaders can filter through advice and conventional wisdom to act purposefully. When

you thoughtfully embrace a virtue, it is your friend. But when you do so out of habit, fear, or compliance you waste energy and risk losing your way. By resisting the quiet, consistent undertow of convention, you honor the wisdom of business virtues and you flourish as a leader. But when you unthinkingly accepting your sacred cows, you pay a tax. The tax can come in many forms: wasted energy, frustration, poor performance, and burnout. But the worst part of the sacred cow tax is that you don't even know you're paying it.

Solving the Virtue Problem

Jealousy, selfishness, and greed are demons that some leaders grapple with, and there are many places to look for help if these are your issues. But I find virtue that is secretly harmful to be a much more interesting problem than obvious vice. I'm driven to help well-meaning leaders discover problems they don't know they have, not to help lazy leaders work on the issues they've been willfully accepting for years. When leaders work to play cynical survival games to lie low and make it through to retirement without getting laid off, I feel no urge to help them. I shed no tears for the demise of lazy, cynical, selfish leaders afraid to lead. But I'm galvanized when I see someone held back *because* of their good intentions. I'm most interested in helping leaders who fail because they did something they felt good about, not because they did something that felt wrong.

Steve, the head of an accounting department at a hospital, can't break his collaboration habit. His boss needs him to take the risk to provide a quick opinion in a senior off-site meeting, but Steve feels compelled to return to work and seek the input of his team before making a recommendation. His belief in collaboration prevents him from stepping up and giving his own point of view on the fly. He blindly follows the path of collaboration to inaction, makes a decision too slowly, and misses the opportunity to lead.

The real shame is that Steve likely doesn't see the flaw in his ways and thus hasn't learned anything. Ask him what happened, and he'll tell

you his boss doesn't value collaboration highly enough. I asked Steve to consider another possibility: maybe he believed in collaboration so much because it feels good—and, in this case, because it kept him from having to stick his neck out and offer his own point of view. Sometimes, without realizing it, we use our most treasured values as an excuse to avoid the discomfort of actually leading. I believe Steve has good judgment and is capable of making quick decisions. But his belief in collaboration blocks him from setting free his latent abilities and allowing them to shine.

Good intentions that turn into bad decisions are among the most interesting—and insidious and frustrating—problems I see in workplaces today. It's devastating to see a man plateau at work because he has been told to be collaborative and now he's collaborating so much it's choking him. Or a woman who has been encouraged to maintain the highest standards struggle, unable to see how her drive to be excellent in all things causes her superiors to view her as "stuck in the weeds" and therefore not ready for promotion. Leaders need the wherewithal to ask forbidden questions: Why should I collaborate? Is passion healthy? Does everything I do need my best effort? Should I prepare less? Should I care less? Leaders need to be wise to the seductive power of unquestioned orthodoxies.

Why are sacred cows so attractive and why do they exist? When do they help and when do they hurt? There isn't a single answer to any of these questions. Various virtues operate differently from one another, and they become sacred cows in individual, specific ways. The nature of excellence, for example, is completely different from that of fairness, which in turn is completely different from collaboration. Each of these virtues-turned-sacred-cows emerges from a particular mix of culture and cognition. In this book, I analyze the seven most destructive sacred cows with the intention of building up your awareness of them. I'll rely on stories from the real world of business and from current academic research.

The real world launches products, plans budgets, designs systems, and makes tradeoffs. The real world can be a productive place, except

that, unexamined, the real world tends to keep replaying the same corporate comedies and tragedies over and over. Here's where the academy comes in. Researchers at universities examine the real world and build theories that explain why things happen as they do. We, the actors in these recurring dramas, use the theories to gain needed insight into and awareness about ourselves and our world. Ideally, we achieve a measure of enlightenment and stop making the same mistakes. And, in this way, the real world gets smarter. But theory needs to be grounded. Like the real world, theory isn't flawless, and too often it glides above reality, disconnected from the world it describes. Insights from theories can lose context and become too abstract to be useful.

My intellectual training ground, Duke Corporate Education (Duke CE), exists to help the real world have its theoretical cake and eat it too. Although Duke University's basketball team, medical school and other programs are each highly ranked, only its custom executive education service—Duke CE—has been ranked number one in the world every year over a ten-year period, from 2003 to 2012 (by the *Financial Times* of London and *BusinessWeek*). I spent my thirties working for and with Duke CE, living at the crossroads of two worlds: the academic world of ideas and the practical world of action. This book lives at that intersection.

Duke CE has been successful because the people there help their clients resist both the cynical tug of a hopelessly real world mired in its recurring dramas *and* the false promise of an escape to idealistically pure theory. The people at Duke CE know that the work that matters is real enough to be practical right away and insightful enough to be of long-lasting value. Overcoming the sacred cows holding you back at work requires new, research-based theories and the pragmatic examples of real-world leadership.

Find Your Hidden Beliefs

An unexamined reverence for sacred cows is a wide-ranging, universal phenomenon. But in order to help you achieve real performance improvement, we need to get specific. The seven business virtues that can turn

into the most powerful, hidden, and damaging sacred cows are: balance, collaboration, creativity, excellence, fairness, passion, and preparation.

In their manifestation as sacred cows, these seven qualities show up in workplaces around the world, in every industry, and at every level of leadership, and they are rarely questioned. Each has a well-deserved reputation for being good and virtuous. But that reputation lulls leaders into a complacency that can blind them to the harsh effects these seven can have when left unexamined. I focus on these seven because they are the most frequently advocated, widely beloved, and least frequently questioned orthodoxies at work.

Take a look at the symptoms of each of the seven sacred cows as I describe them below, and do a little self-screening to diagnose your biggest backfire. You'll likely recognize yourself or someone else in one or more of them. To be sure, the complete absence of any of these virtues would be a tremendous problem for any leader. The trick is in cultivating an awareness of when and how they function well, when and how they backfire, and how to recalibrate them so that they're helping and not hurting.

Balance

In modern life and in the modern workplace, balance is a hallowed virtue. Balance operates through a constant stream of choices. In an effort to be balanced, leaders make choices to be and do many different things. They may choose to be both strong parents and strong managers. They may choose to focus on both short-term results and long-term strategy, or to be both detail oriented and visionary. All of these choices can too easily drift toward the middle in a cowardly compromise of nothingness. Balance backfires when it moves from being about bold, sometimes tough, choices to being about bland compromises. If a leader, in striving for balance, is mediocre at everything (or engenders mediocrity in her employees), then balance has backfired.

Balance is valuable. Avoiding extremes and embracing moderation is often wise. Similarly, considering both sides of an argument before acting serves us well. The Founding Fathers separated powers in the

American government, creating a system of checks and balances that would prevent any one individual or group from seizing all control. And anyone who has tried to work too many eighty-hour weeks or tried to subsist on a diet of coffee and donuts alone knows that balance is a virtue. Balance is particularly helpful at times of transition, when first-time managers seek to complement their technical skills with softer leadership skills. When an accountant makes partner, she may need to balance her accounting skills with the ability to win business and lead teams. When a highly skilled programmer is asked to lead a team of other programmers, he may need to learn new social, team-building, and administrative skills to augment his technical acumen.

But when “balance” is misconstrued to mean constant compromise, several unfortunate things happen. You can’t outsmart a dilemma by avoiding it in the name of balance. If you try to balance work and life by doing everything at once you’ll do everything poorly. Bold leaders must make tough choices. And when we as leaders move from doing one thing well to many things poorly, our organizations suffer. Leaders who hide behind balance as an excuse to avoid taking a stand for an unpopular position do themselves and their companies a disservice. In short, when balance encourages us to say yes to everything all at once, we end up saying no to leadership.

I call this dysfunctional pursuit of balance *bland balance*. It leads us to compromise in the face of dilemmas, make unnecessary trade-offs in an attempt to seek safety, divide our attention, delay or duck necessary decisions, and handle uncertainty poorly.

Its remedy is *bold balance*. Bold balance at work rejects compromise as a default, work-life balance as a constant, mastery of all things as an expectation, holding unpopular positions as a taboo, and saying yes to all things as wisdom. You can achieve bold balance when you respect the model of moderation and balanced scales but also hold up other conceptions of balance as equally valid. The ebb and flow of waves and the tides help maintain a balanced ecosystem and avoid extremes such as flooding—but the ocean itself is anything but safe and bland. And four (sometimes extreme) seasons point to a continuing and complex balance

among many natural cycles. Balance is a dynamic process that requires your constant attention and awareness.

Collaboration

When I talk about “collaboration” in the context of this book, I mean working together with people in your organization. Collaboration becomes a sacred cow when it is automatic. It’s a strong part of good leadership, and can be part of an effective work style, when it is accountable. *Automatic collaboration* means working together by default instead of making the purposeful, conscious choice to do so. The default state of working should be working alone; leaders should collaborate only when they must. Depending on your role, that may mean a significant part of your job requires collaboration. But ask yourself the question: does this work really need more than me? Or am I simply engaging in automatic collaboration?

When leaders do collaborate, it must be accountable, not automatic. Accountable collaboration means everyone has a clear understanding of the mission of the team, and the goal of the team is to achieve its mission and disband. When collaboration is accountable, everyone knows everyone else’s responsibility, and they aren’t afraid to point out when the ball is dropped.

Great advances have been achieved through working together. As American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead reportedly said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Humans must work together to solve difficult problems. Research shows the power of teams. When we strive for greater diversity in teams by crossing national or continental cultures, or by mixing disciplines and demographics, civilized enlightenment and new insights arise. When previously unsolvable problems find solutions through crowdsourcing, collaboration makes miracles. When problems are more fully understood, when logic is rigorously tested, or when richer ideas are generated, working in teams makes companies perform better.

But when working together has become an unexamined cultural norm, it can cause big problems:

- Leaders often peg a worker who performs independent tasks apart from a team as antisocial.
- A culture of learned helplessness can arise, causing, for example, a product manager to fear being decisive about a new feature without exhaustively interviewing teammates and coming to a consensus. Naturally, innovation suffers.
- Workgroups can grow too big and lose their focus, their roles and responsibilities morphing into ambiguity, lack of accountability, and time wasted.
- Team structures can engender corporate dysfunction when “underlap” creeps into projects, with team members assuming someone else will get the task done.
- Working with others is sometimes a blast, sometimes a must, and sometimes a waste. Accountable collaboration respects teamwork as a tool you can use when a situation demands it. In small groups, when you distinguish roles and outline rules of engagement, your team can be greater than the sum of its parts. Collaboration works when you and your team complement each other and are all accountable for your own contribution. Knowing the when and how of working collaboratively multiplies your effectiveness. This means avoiding collaboration as a default.

Creativity

Creativity involves bringing something new into the world. It’s an enticing quality—it can be fun and exciting to exercise creativity, and creative breakthroughs can make a real difference to companies or whole industries. But often an old idea will do just fine. If not, then combining two existing ideas to make a new combination will usually suffice. If you’ve carefully studied the past, looking without shame to borrow, modify, or recycle an existing idea, then you’re using *useful*

creativity—being creative enough to be effective within the context of the enterprise at hand.

But too often creativity backfires because of a leader's need to add her own ideas. This is *narcissistic creativity*. Adopting someone else's best practice doesn't give you the same sense of pride and accomplishment as generating a new best practice. Creating a needless innovation feels better to the innovator than does creating nothing at all. In such cases, creativity has stopped being a tool used in service of larger goals, and has become the very personal source of a leader's narcissistic needs.

Sure, the world needs creators. Without new designs, new products and new business models, leaders risk losing out to more innovative competitors and economies risk decline. Moreover, creativity often makes life better. It drives commerce, with old ideas giving way to new—horses to cars, telegraphs to radios, and dial-up to Wi-Fi.

Nurses who come up with creative ways to improve patient intake demonstrate the emergent leadership and creative problem solving that save lives. Customer service representatives who think of creative ways to better serve customers add meaningful value to their companies. CEOs who see flagging business models and rally teams to come up with new and better ways to structure deals help ensure the value of shareholder equity.

But too often we overvalue creativity. As part of her doctoral research completed at the University of North Carolina, Tina Jaullerat shows that despite the enthusiastic, well-meaning quest for creativity at the workplace, it's not clear that more creative ideas lead to more innovation. In fact, her studies show that the more novel an idea, the less likely it was to become part of a value-generating innovation.¹²

The urge to feel the creative spark can cause us to feel compelled to leave our mark on an organization. But too often the urge to produce creative work springs from the leader's own drive to leave a legacy instead of a real business need. Leaders who invent something new—to meet their internal needs for ego gratification—when something old will do only yield destruction, waste, and dysfunction.

Useful creativity delivers value, not just novelty.

Excellence

Excellence means high quality; our pursuit of it backfires when our high standards choke progress. This typically happens when we are focused on excellence in the *process* rather than excellence in the *outcome*. When our excellence muscle is exercised to ensure that every step of a process is flawless, we may worry too much; we may not take enough steps, or the right ones; and we may lose sight of the bigger picture. Instead of holding our process to such a high standard, there are times when we need only focus on aiming for excellence in a final outcome. In these instances it's tolerance for quick failures, followed by constant learning and tweaking, that are most likely to lead us to the best possible result.

Hearing Beethoven's sonatas or seeing Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling expand our ideas of what is possible and enriches our imaginations. We follow athletes who dazzle us with win after win and record after record, and delight in the capabilities of human physical effort. We know good work when we see it, and we award respect to those who make excellence a habit and wow us with consistent quality.

A salesperson who respects a customer enough to know a product cold, listen well, understand a customer's needs, and surpass expectations with follow-through every time deserves praise. A pharmacist who triple-checks correct dosages prevents medical emergencies. A quality assurance engineer who serves as the last line of defense prior to a product launch and painstakingly tests all new features in each type of web browser protects against technology fails.

So some say good enough is for wimps, losers, and copouts. But we set a trap for ourselves when we expect excellence in everything, when excellence becomes a standard that's ongoing and omnipresent. Regardless of how great a leader's accomplishments are, there is always another ladder to climb. Excellence is the drug of choice for the ambitious perfectionist, and it can lead to exhaustion and ruin. High standards are wasted on activities of low importance because leaders can't give themselves a break. Some leaders obsess over every mistake, even the ones that don't matter. Sure, the sales plan needs to be directionally correct. But wouldn't it be better to spend more time selling and less time polishing

the plan? Sure, you need to have the buy-in of your executive team, but wouldn't they rather you just get started instead of wasting time covering your ass with approvals?

When excellence is worshipped, it becomes a goal in and of itself, disconnected from larger goals. If you suspect excellence backfires for you, reflect on the connection between your self-esteem and your work. Do you need to cut that cord? Can you use rough drafts and prototypes to start, learn, and improve quickly? To avoid the side effects of excellence, you'll need to differentiate between what *can* be done in the name of excellence and what *should* be done in the name of progress.

Fairness

When I examine “fairness” as a virtue or sacred cow, I'm talking about the treatment we give to others and receive from others at work. Fairness backfires when some of our noblest instincts force us to ensure equitable outcomes rather than equitable processes (in this way it's a mirror image of excellence, which is healthy when focused on outcomes and goes off the rails when focused on process). A leader's job is to make sure everyone—including herself—has a fair chance. Fairness can easily backfire as the line between a fair chance and a seemingly fair result is often blurred. After all, it's much easier to look at and discuss the fairness of the result than it is to ensure a fair process. The result is often objective and tangible—office size, bonus, awards, promotions—whereas the process is a squishy mess of dozens of little decisions.

The urge to be treated fairly and to treat others fairly comes from two very strong places: nature and nurture. Scientists have shown how our neurochemistry encourages us to find a fair outcome so we can activate our brain's reward network. And we are taught fairness as children, and encouraged as adults to be fair. If people didn't value fairness, what kind of world would we have? Laws and customs based on the principle of fairness protect fundamental rights and ensure that guilty parties pay for their wrongdoing.

But in the world of work, this strong tug toward fairness can lead to some nasty unintended consequences:

- Sometimes leaders avoid making exceptions for even exceptional performance, afraid of feeling unfair or being accused of unfairness. Think of the boss who sent his best employee to a training trip in Switzerland last year. This year he only has the budget to send one of his employees to a training trip in Costa Rica, but he's not willing to send his best employee again because it doesn't feel fair.
- Fairness also backfires when leaders keep score, counting exactly what someone else was given. In the process, they burn precious emotional and intellectual energy in the unproductive game of making sure everyone gets his or her fair share.
- Most troubling is the research that shows that people who feel they have been unfairly treated are more likely to bend the rules. One disturbing study showed that some business school students who felt their effort wasn't appropriately rewarded with high grades were more likely to cheat on an exam.¹³
- To honor fairness in process and not necessarily in results, you need the courage to treat people differently, make appropriate exceptions, and dole out punishments when needed. As a leader, you need to be able to discriminate between what you want or need and what someone else wants or needs. You'll need to avoid the wasted energy of deciding whether you got your fair share at work, and to train yourself to focus your fire on beating the competition instead of your colleagues. And, importantly, learn to recognize the times when you use fairness as an excuse to make decisions you'll later regret.

Passion

“Passion,” for our purposes, means the quality of caring deeply about your work. It's a good and healthy thing when a passion for work is in harmony with other parts of your life. If caring about one part of your work makes you better at some other aspect of the job, then it is a healthy,

harmonious passion. But passion backfires when it becomes obsessive. *Obsessive passion* crowds out other aspects of your life and your work, causing you to ruminate on one thing at the expense of others.

We can see the passion of our most successful leaders. Their long hours, sweat, and enthusiasm are readily observable, and it's natural for us to want to emulate that energy. But less visible traits like judgment, emotional maturity, and sophistication often lie beneath the surface of passion. When passion is healthy, it's not an independent force, but a part of a diverse set of traits. Workers fueled by harmonious passion are not less driven than their obsessive colleagues. Instead, they are better supported, because they have invested in building a diverse set of long-term relationships and interests. Good passion is in harmony with other aspects of a leader's life.

Bad passion crowds out everything else; it is characterized by obsessive attitude and compulsive action. Obsessive passion leads to wild swings from huge enthusiasm at the start of a project to disappointment and regret when delays, challenges, or changes arise. It's worth remembering that high-octane fuel helps cars run faster because, counterintuitively, it burns more slowly. If you're fueled by the cheap stuff that flames out fast you'll need to learn to avoid burnout by shutting down more frequently, more completely, and with greater effect.

Preparation

By "preparation," I mean getting yourself ready to do work. Sometimes the preparation and the work happen at nearly the same time, which can be both healthy and productive. Too much *backstage preparation* isn't helpful. It can delay work without improving the product: hiding out and reading is not helpful preparation; polishing slides is not as helpful as starting the meeting and learning in real time. *Onstage preparation* happens when you're learning as you're doing. It's the exhilarating, powerful process of making yourself vulnerable to be persuaded and changed, even as you're attempting to persuade. Leaders who prepare onstage have the guts to admit to themselves and others that they are always a work in progress. And through this commitment, these leaders

make so much more progress than if they viewed preparation as separate from the work. Preparation backstage happens alone, without the benefit of real-time feedback. Backstage preparation backfires because it slows down our development, and because it too often leads us to fall in love with a script we've worked hard to prepare, at the expense of being flexible and always willing to learn more about the material.

Preparation is one of the most widely celebrated virtues: measure and prep the ingredients before cooking a meal; stretch before a run; and do your "homework" before a job interview or a client meeting. By preparing ahead of time, you give yourself a significant advantage. You build your capabilities, practice the fundamentals, and come off the blocks equipped for success. From the Boy Scout motto—"Be Prepared"—to SAT prep classes, we are taught from an early age that good results go to those who are ready.

When we learn and expand our skills without falling in love with our work, preparation is a good thing. And preparation *is* critical for the moments when leaders truly need to develop their expertise to reduce the risk of a critical failure. But preparation can backfire in unexpected ways. Professors who sought to test the effect of preparation on test performance were surprised to learn that requiring homework actually reduced students' exam scores in an operations management class. In their study, students in "Treatment A" were in a section of a class that had to complete problem sets as part of their grade, while "Treatment B" students were in a different section of the same class that had no homework assignments. In the words of the paper's authors, "Contrary to our expectations, students given Treatment A had a lower overall exam mean than did the Treatment B students." Expending too much energy in homework, it seemed, had sapped the students' ability to concentrate on the exam.¹⁴

In the workplace, preparation can backfire by causing you to fall in love with your work to the point that you defend what you should change. It backfires when your work becomes your baby. And sometimes, preparation is merely an excuse not to take action.

Leaders who master onstage preparation thrive on feedback and improvisation. They avoid overpreparing things that don't matter,

and thus funnel their time and energy wisely. When you jettison such old mental models of preparation as studying for tests and move toward viewing all work performance as an opportunity to deepen your skills and prepare for the next stages of work, you free yourself up to use time more effectively and accelerate your skill building and your learning.

Train Your Cow, Train Yourself

Julian, the CEO of the small consulting firm who struggled in his first year at the top, had spent his entire life learning the lesson that strategy is often overrated. Execution is everything, thought Julian. But when his former boss stepped in to offer a new perspective, Julian learned a new lesson and began charting a new course.

“As you know,” he told his entire staff at a special company meeting, “I like to run a tight ship. But the only reason you tighten up the ship is so she’ll sail faster. Now that we’ve tightened things up around here, I need your help in picking up our speed so we can grow more rapidly than ever. But this time, we’ll grow smartly.”

He called his new plan “Growth, Version 2,” but it was really “Julian, Version 2.” He put together several two-week teams charged with making concrete suggestions on smart ways to bring back some of the fun and rewards that had driven growth at the firm. After two weeks, the groups were disbanded as planned. Although Julian maintained his belief in the power of efficient implementation, he grew as a leader by listening to his people. He took the best recommendations from his people and put some of the positive energy back into the company, all while running a tighter ship. The growth rate returned, but this time without the waste.

In India, drivers sometimes have to work hard to make their way around the cows that roam the crowded streets. Figurative sacred cows—the kind that we find in the workplace—may be harder to see, but once discovered they can be avoided. In each of the chapters ahead, I share real-world stories, academic research, and solutions to help you train yourself to avoid allowing workplace virtues—and your

own personal strengths and preferences—to turn into sacred cows. You may recognize yourself or someone you work with in some of the stories of the dark side of workplace virtues. The research will help you understand more deeply how and why the sacred cows came to be so powerful and, in some cases, so powerfully destructive. Each chapter has solutions designed to help you train yourself to avoid the waste that comes from the unintended consequences of unexamined conventional wisdom. By finally recognizing and avoiding the power and peril of sacred cows at work, leaders can find a clear path between their best intentions and the success they deserve.

If you'd like a custom report to help you focus your attention on the chapters that relate most to your own biggest sacred cows at work, visit my website and take the free, five-minute assessment: <http://www.breedenideas.com>.

About the Author

Jake Breeden teaches leaders at some of the world's leading companies. As one of Duke Corporate Education's most active faculty members he has taught in 27 countries, in Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. Some of his clients for leadership development programs include Cisco, Starbucks, Microsoft, Deloitte, HP, Google, and IBM. He has also taught as an adjunct professor for UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School and conducted training and Webinars for the Association of National Advertiser's (ANA) School of Marketing.

Covering a broad range of topics, Jake has delivered strategy, marketing, communications, and leadership programs. He has developed several original executive education workshops, including "Finding and Tipping Your Organization's Sacred Cows," "Leadership Storytelling Lessons from Hollywood," "The Big Bad Idea Innovation Workshop," and "The Game of Will: A Team-Based Decision-Making Exercise." He has taught at every level in organizations from college hires to board-level executives.

Before starting his own teaching and consulting practice, Jake worked at Duke CE as director of business development and managing director, managing key client relationships and directing business

development. He previously served on the faculty and staff at Furman University. As a member of the communication studies faculty at Furman he taught courses in mass communication and advocacy and served as the faculty advisor for the college TV station. As Web development director at Furman, he led the development of Engage-Furman.com, an award-winning micro-site that pioneered the use of student blogs in 1999. Previously, he started the interactive marketing group for Erwin-Penland, one of the fastest growing ad agencies in the Southeastern United States. He started his career at Agnew, Carter, McCarthy, a PR firm based in Boston.

Jake earned an MBA from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, an MS in public relations at Boston University's College of Communication and a BA in English from the University of South Carolina. He lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where his three daughters keep him laughing and learning. More information on Jake is available on his website at www.breedenideas.com.