



DOING THE HARD WORK

The hardest work of leadership is often the work within.

What Are You Bringing Into the Room?

How past experiences can quietly shape what you notice, fear, expect, and do as a leader

You did not become the person you are when you started leading. **You brought a lifetime with you.** Some experiences were obviously significant: loss, abuse, abandonment, instability, serious conflict, or other acute trauma. Others may seem ordinary - an emotionally unavailable parent, a household where achievement received attention, a family where conflict was avoided, or a childhood where being useful, agreeable, successful, quiet, tough, or responsible made life easier.

Children are remarkably good at adapting. They learn what gets love, what keeps them safe, what causes conflict, what makes people proud, and what parts of themselves are better kept hidden. The child eventually becomes an adult. The environment changes. **But some adaptations remain.** The term *inner child* is often used to describe earlier emotional patterns, needs, fears, and learned responses that can continue influencing adult behavior. You may no longer consciously remember learning the rule. The rule may still be helping make decisions.

1 Trauma does not always look dramatic

When people hear *trauma*, they often imagine catastrophe. Those experiences matter enormously. But leadership development also benefits from a broader question: **What did my experiences teach me I needed to do to feel safe, valued, connected, or accepted?** Perform to receive approval. Please people to avoid rejection. Stay useful to remain valuable. Stay quiet to avoid conflict. Stay in control to prevent chaos. Do not need anyone to avoid disappointment. These strategies may have worked remarkably well. Some can even help create successful adults. The problem begins when a useful adaptation becomes an automatic response we can no longer choose.

ASK YOURSELF: What did I learn early in life that I needed to do to be safe, valued, accepted, or loved?

2 Your inner child may have grown up and gotten a job

Imagine a founder who cannot tolerate disappointing a customer. It looks like customer service - and maybe it is. But if disappointment creates an emotional reaction far larger than the business situation deserves, the founder may repeatedly say yes, employees scramble, margins disappear, boundaries erode, and resentment grows. Underneath the business decision may be an older rule: **'People being disappointed in me is not safe.'** Or a leader who must approve everything may call it high standards while an older rule whispers, **'Bad things happen when I am not in control.'** Not every leadership weakness comes from childhood. But our adult explanation is not always the whole explanation.

ASK YOURSELF: Where does the intensity of my reaction seem larger than the situation in front of me?

3 We do not notice everything

Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons made selective attention famous through the experiment commonly associated with the *Invisible Gorilla*: people concentrating on one task can fail to notice something unexpected directly in front of them. There is a powerful leadership analogy. **We do not experience everything happening around us equally.** Expectations, goals, fears, and learned patterns influence what receives attention. A leader sensitive to rejection may quickly notice disappointment. Someone shaped by financial instability may notice downside risk before opportunity. A people pleaser may notice everyone's emotional state before noticing their own needs. Our experience can influence not only how we interpret what we see, but what we notice in the first place.

ASK YOURSELF: What am I exceptionally good at noticing - and what might that focus make easier for me to miss?



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4 Separate the present situation from the old story

An employee challenges you. A customer complains. Someone does not return your call. The business has a bad month. Your partner seems disappointed. The event is happening in the present, but your reaction may contain both **what is happening now** and **what this feels like because of what happened before**. The work is not to dismiss the present by saying, 'This is just my childhood.' Something real may be happening. Instead ask: **How much of my reaction belongs to this situation, and how much might belong to something older?** That small separation creates room for choice.

ASK YOURSELF: Is my reaction proportional to what is happening now, or does this situation seem to be touching something much older?

5 Awareness creates choice

The objective is not to spend the rest of your life blaming your parents or endlessly analyzing childhood. The leadership value is practical: **becoming aware of what is driving you**. What remains subconscious has tremendous freedom to influence behavior. Once you recognize a pattern, you gain another option. 'I notice that I want everyone to be happy with me' does not mean you have to make everyone happy. 'I notice that losing control makes me anxious' does not mean you need to take the decision back. The old response may still appear. **But appearing and controlling are different things.**

ASK YOURSELF: What would become possible if I could notice one of my automatic patterns before I acted on it?

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Past experiences can become adaptations; adaptations can become subconscious rules; those rules can shape attention and automatic reactions. Awareness inserts a choice point.

PAST EXPERIENCE	ADAPTATION	SUBCONSCIOUS RULE	ATTENTION	REACTION	CHOICE
What happened?	What did I learn to do?	What keeps me safe or valued?	What do I notice or miss?	What happens automatically?	What does today require?

The goal is not to erase your history. It is to become aware enough of your history that it does not have to make today's decisions for you.

OLD PATTERN: Trigger -> React -> Protect

GROWING AWARENESS: Trigger -> Notice -> Get Curious -> Understand -> Choose

THE LEADERSHIP BLIND-SPOT TEST

REACTION - Where do I react strongly? What reliably creates anxiety, anger, defensiveness, shame, urgency, or a need for control?

PATTERN - What do I automatically do? Please? Perform? Withdraw? Control? Fix? Avoid? Prove? Rescue? Work harder?

ORIGIN - What might I have learned? When did this response become useful?

ATTENTION - What am I trained to notice? Risk? Rejection? Failure? Conflict? Other people's emotions? Evidence that I am succeeding?

BLIND SPOT - What might I not be seeing? What would another person in the room notice that I do not?

PRESENT - What is actually happening now? Can I separate today's facts from yesterday's expectations?

CHOICE - What does this moment require from the adult leader I am today?

Am I responding to the person and situation in front of me - or to something they unknowingly represent from my past?

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Every leader brings a history into the room. Some becomes wisdom. Some becomes strength. Some becomes intuition. And some becomes a blind spot. Personal growth is about becoming curious enough to understand those adaptations - and free enough to decide whether they still belong in the driver's seat.

AgStrat works with founders and leaders who are building stronger organizations while developing the personal capacity required to lead them. To begin a confidential conversation, contact AgStrat at virgil@agstratsolutions.com.

Awareness | Curiosity | Choice | Growth | Leadership