



BY KELLY MEERBOTT, SPEAKER + LEADERSHIP COACH

7 INSIGHTS ON LEADERSHIP FROM 20 YEARS COACHING EXECUTIVES

INTRODUCTION

As an executive coach, I spend my day in conversation with leaders of all backgrounds and experience. While the details vary, the heart of our dialogue remains the same across the board: everyone wants to be the best leader they can be and bring out the best in their teams. They want to be competent yet compassionate, flexible but committed, and move the needle of success for their organizations.

I've found that executives, for the most part, hit the same stumbling blocks as they move their career and work forward. My job is to help them evolve, and this is what I've learned from successfully coaching leaders to be the best they can be.

Imposter Syndrome Is Real — and EVERYONE Has It

If you find yourself sitting in a high-level meeting and feeling like at any moment someone is going to realize that you don't belong there, rest

assured: everyone else in the meeting is having EXACTLY the same thought.

According to the California Institute of Technology Counseling Center, Impostor Syndrome is “a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist even in face of information that indicates that the opposite is true. It is experienced internally as chronic self-doubt, and feelings of intellectual fraudulence.”

Imposter Syndrome is rooted in “not enough.” Not smart enough, not old enough, not experienced enough — a core belief that you just are not good enough.

Seth Godin has an interesting take on imposter syndrome. “It’s rampant. The big reason is that we’re all impostors. You’re not imagining that you’re an impostor, it’s likely that you are one. Everyone who is doing important work is working on something that might not work.”

So how do you reset yourself and manage this feeling?

TAKE THESE STEPS.

STEP 1

Know what imposter syndrome is.

Do you find it hard to accept compliments? Do you think your success is more about luck than skill? Do you hold yourself to unreasonable standards? While women are usually willing to acknowledge imposter syndrome, men often ignore the signs. Awareness, acceptance, and action will help change your viewpoint.

STEP 2

Get Grounded.

Find your core values. These values tell you who you are, both as a person and as an executive. Remind yourself what it is that others see in you that helped you arrive where you are today. Make sure you have a handful of trusted friends/advisors/mentors with whom you can be yourself.

STEP 3

Take Inventory.

Take a long, hard look at the work you're doing with the emotion removed. Are you doing the best you can? Then you deserve to be where you are. If not, do better, and imposter syndrome will fade.



STEP 4

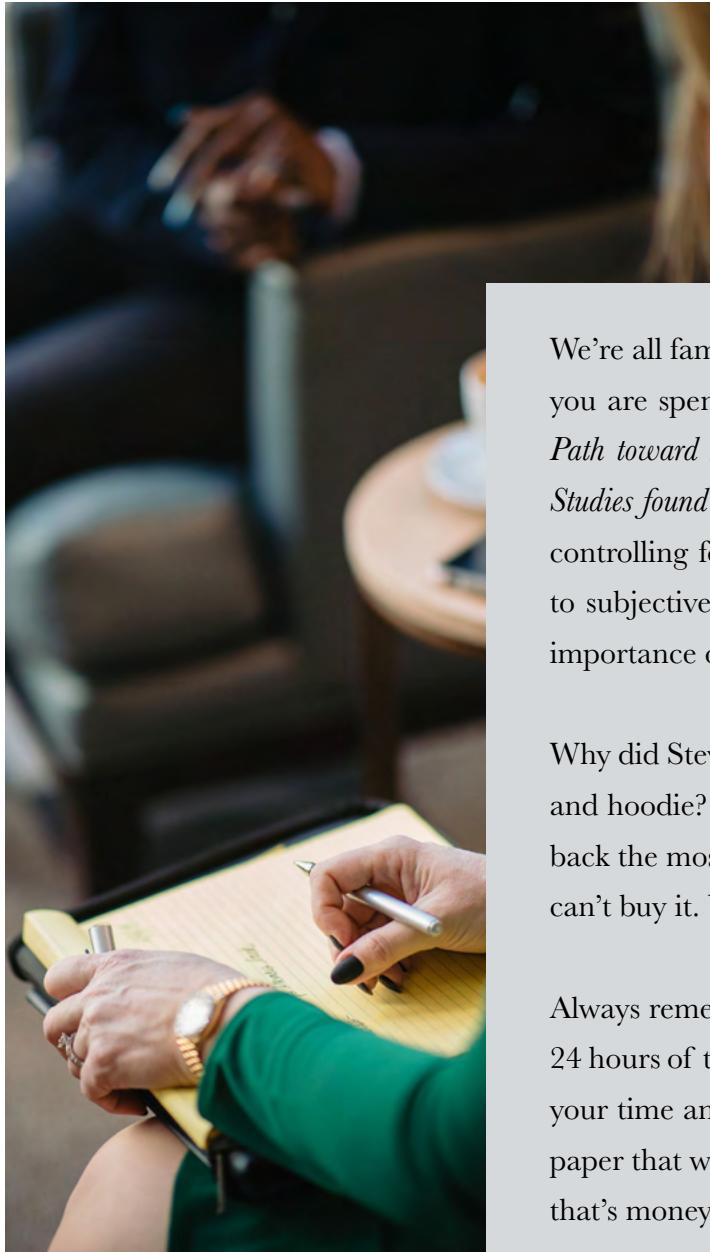
Have Good People Around You.

Make sure you surround yourself with good people. "Frenemies" might be a common work experience, but they can also work to sap your confidence. Limit your time with these folks as much as you can without damaging the connection or behaving inappropriately.

STEP 5

Remind Yourself That You Provide Value No One Else Can.

Here's a great tip: keep a file of compliments. Whether it's your LinkedIn recommendations, emails that say how great a job you did, or even cards and letters — have it handy so you can reference when you're not feeling like the leader you are.



TIME IS CURRENCY, so spend it more effectively.

We're all familiar with the old saying, "time is money." When you give someone your time, you are spending your most important currency. *A recent study called Time Affluence as a Path toward Personal Happiness and Ethical Business Practice: Empirical Evidence from Four Studies found that people were happier when they had more time — not more money.* "Even after controlling for material affluence, the experience of time affluence was positively related to subjective well-being," the study concluded. Successful leaders are well aware of the importance of time, so they set up systems that allow them to save time.

Why did Steve Jobs always wear a black turtleneck, or Mark Zuckerberg always wears a tee and hoodie? Because they know that not spending time choosing what to wear gives them back the most precious commodity of time. Entrepreneur Mark Cuban says of time, "You can't buy it. You can't find it. You can't store it. You can't trade it."

Always remember: money can be created, but time cannot. Every morning you're handed 24 hours of time, but that time always runs out by the end of the day. Learning to maximize your time and productivity will give you back the time to do all the items I suggest in this paper that will make you both happier AND more effective. Because when you waste time, that's money badly spent.

HOW DO YOU RECAPTURE YOUR TIME?

STEP 1

Set a Time Budget.

Once you make that deep connection to the concept of time as currency, you can begin to set a time budget. I recommend that at the start of each week (I like doing this on Sunday nights) you take a long look at your week's schedule and tasks — as well as your self-care items such as working out or spending time with your family. Determine how much time you can dedicate to a project, and schedule accordingly.

STEP 2

Defend Your Time.

Do you leave your cash randomly lying around the office for anyone to just grab whenever they want? Of course you don't. So stop doing that with your time! Don't let people interrupt you during projects that require intense focus. You can even go so far as to set "office hours" like a college professor so people know the best time to approach you. Be fiercely protective of your time. Be ferocious.

STEP 3

Do the Deep Work.

Here's the secret about deep work: when you focus 100% of your energy on a task, the task is done quickly and effectively — and gives you the breathing room for innovation and creativity. Beyond helping you give your best to each project, you'll model this for your team so they know they can follow your lead and have set times for deep focus. Everyone will be more effective.



STEP 4

Eat the Frog.

If you want to spend your time more wisely, you need to do an audit of your various duties and figure out which ones are the biggest time sucks. What tasks present the biggest stumbling blocks? And, more importantly, what do you like doing the least each day? Mark Twain famously said, "If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And If it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first." So "eat the frog" and do your worst tasks first.

STEP 5

Outsource.

What do you get paid per hour? While you probably think more in terms of annual salary than hourly at this juncture, it's worth it to take the time to figure it out. If your salary is \$350,000 a year, your hourly wage is about \$168 (here's a handy calculator for you). So if you apply the "time as money" concept here, that means you're spending \$168/hr to go grocery shopping or clean your toilet. If someone else can do these tasks more cheaply, then stop doing them and hire someone else. This applies at the office too; if scheduling your own appointments eats a lot of time, have an employee do it for you so your company can spend your \$168/hr on the work that only YOU can do.

BLOCK OUT THE NOISE

Cal Newport, author of the book Deep Work: Rules For Focus In A Distracted World, speaks at length about the need for doing focused work without distractions. On NPR, he said, “By letting email and other messages guide our workday, we’re weakening our ability to do the most challenging kinds of work — “deep work.” Deep work requires sustained attention, whether the task is writing marketing copy or solving a tricky engineering problem. We’re also denying ourselves the satisfaction that often comes from committing our full attention to a task. Replying to a string of emails rarely arouses this same feeling.”

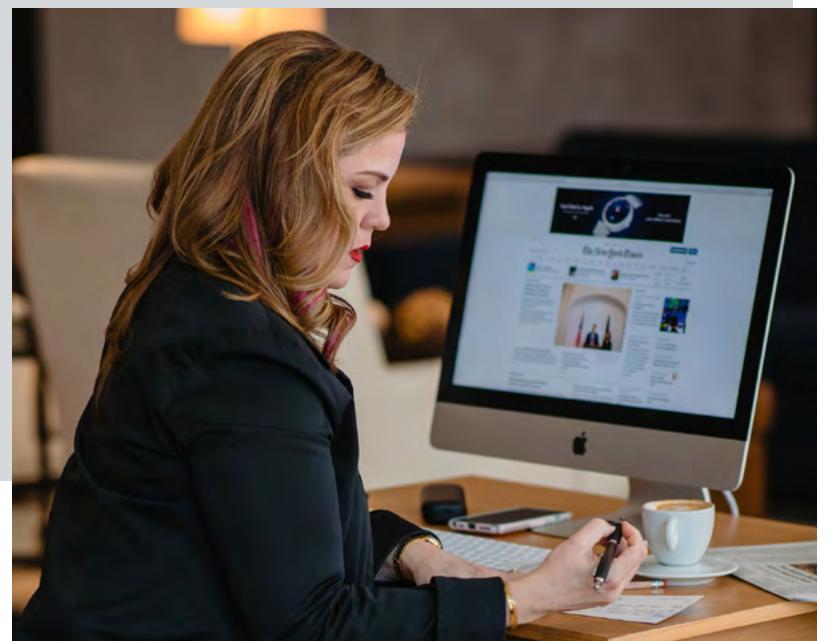
His research suggests that people who innovate successfully are those who are able to do deep work, or long uninterrupted times of working, free from all distractions.

Newport recommends approaching work differently than most of us do now, as we respond to every notification alert we receive on our various connected devices.

He says, “the batching of hard but important intellectual work into long, uninterrupted stretches,” is the best way to make use of focus and get that deep work done.

This might seem antithetical to most office standards, where instant responses are expected, often 24 hours a day.

Of course, it’s not just our constant digital alerts that distract us. As a leader, you’re put in a position where you might receive unexpectedly harsh criticism — and as we all know, a criticism weighs five times as much as a compliment so they can weigh you down. As my grandfather used to say, “When you put your head above the crowd, you become an easy target.” This means you need to have strategies in place to prevent other people from distracting you.



HOW CAN YOU TAKE BACK YOUR FOCUS?

STEP 1

Stop Letting Time Sucks Hijack Your Productivity

How often do you really need to check your LinkedIn? And I won't even bring up other social networks because you already know they're a time suck that is likely decreasing your productivity. Set yourself strict time limits on anything that depletes your time without adding value.

STEP 2

Create a "System" for Criticism

Sure, many of the complaints or nasty feedback you receive might be baseless and you realize this, and you can shake them off easily. But if a criticism gets under your skin, you need to create a way to learn from it, accept it, and then move on and take any action necessary. Remember constructive criticism is just information — it's not a personal editorial about you as a human.

STEP 3

Consider a Digital Media Detox

We all know we're living in a tumultuous time right now, and with news stories coming faster and faster, it can be easy to get information and outrage overload. Consider stepping away from most digital forms of news during your working hours (or maybe switch to print, like New York Times columnist Farhad Manjoo did for two months).



STEP 4

Don't Always Be Available

Again, this is counterintuitive to today's work environment, but you need time without distraction to succeed. Schedule "closed door" time for yourself daily, and defend it on your calendar so meetings don't disrupt that time. Make it known that those set times are for you to focus, exclusively.

STEP 5

Make Good Use of Support Staff

If you have a team, use them. Trust them to do the work you hired them to do, and let them do it with the same focus you need yourself. Give them the space to do the work, and assign tasks that others can do to your team members. This will free you up, and is a great way to be a leader. Make sure you use your time doing tasks only you can do.

TAKE CARE IF YOUR INSTRUMENT (YOU!)

Look, I'm going to be hardcore here: if you don't take care of yourself — mind, body, emotion and spirit — you're going to overstretch yourself and veer straight toward burn out.

Being hyper stressed isn't something you should bear with pride; it's actually causing harm both to you and your work performance.

A Harvard Medical School study shows, in fact, that chronic stress causes a cascade of hormonal changes in your body that can do long term harm to your heart and brain.

Before you shrug and say, "Well, stress is part of being an executive leader," take a good look at the people you've seen

succeed, and the ones who flamed out. I'm willing to bet the people doing the best at their work are the ones who take the time to take care of themselves. And not only that — leaders who practice self-care have happy employees, too.

So even if you cringe at the term "self-care," you need to make it part of your life. No, self-care doesn't mean endless massages and aromatherapy (although it can if you prefer). It can be simply working out, spending time outside, or even reading a great book. How it looks varies from person to person.



HOW DO YOU GET STARTED TAKING CARE OF YOUR INSTRUMENT?

STEP 1

It Starts with What You Put in Your Body

How and what are you eating? Look, I'll never tell you that a fast food burger is something to avoid (even if it probably is), but it shouldn't be your primarily food source. You need good, healthy food for at least two meals in a day, whether it's a bulletproof coffee and a smoothie, or a veggie omelet, or a good steak served with some fresh salad — or whatever you prefer to eat that actually nourishes you. Consider watching your carbohydrates as well, particularly in the morning or midday — the National Institutes of Health found productivity rises when you eat more protein-rich meals and ditch the carbs.

STEP 2

Move Your Body

I know. When your plate is beyond full, making fitness a priority can seem impossible. But listen: without your health, you can't succeed. Make the time to move your body at a bare minimum of three times a week. Here's a simple way to do that — during your next conference call, walk and listen. Ask your team members to do walking meetings instead of sitting around the conference table. Two birds with one stone. Best of all, exercise improves everything from memory to decision making to productivity according to a study from the Journal of Sport and Health Science.

STEP 3

Get Enough Rest

According to this study, "Cognitive functions particularly affected by sleep loss include psychomotor and cognitive speed, vigilant and executive attention, working memory, and higher cognitive abilities." As a leader, your most important assets are your attention, memory, and cognitive speed. So get to sleep. You need it. Don't just take my word for it — the CDC has declared insufficient sleep a 'public health problem.' A recent CDC study found more than one-third of American adults are not getting enough sleep on a regular basis.

STEP 4

Do Things that Aren't Work

Golf? SoulCycle (my particular fave)? Bowling? Reading murder mysteries? Whatever it is, you need an activity in your life that is not work related. Yes, I'm talking about a hobby, but it doesn't have to mean model trains. Do something, every day and particularly on the weekends, that fuels you and gives you life, as they say. You will be happier and more able to focus on work at work.

STEP 5

Be Present in Your Life Outside of Work

I get it. Work can be all consuming. It can be hard to shut off and just BE. But there are probably people in your life, and even pets, that need you to show up in their lives and be present, not distracted. Additionally, the journal of Social Psychological and Personality Science found valuing your non-work time had a direct correlation to personal happiness. So don't spend your time at your kid's school concert on your phone. Set it aside, look up, and just be there. You'll all be happier.

THINK BEYOND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Here's a secret that too many executives ignore: personal growth and development is what makes leaders great. Business philosopher Jim Rohn said it best. "The real value in setting goals is not in their achievement," he states, "the acquisition of the things you want is strictly secondary. The major reason for setting goals is to compel you to become the person it takes to achieve them."

Personal development doesn't just benefit the executive, either. Showing your team that you are always improving your personal effectiveness is a great way to model behavior — and employees are clear that working for leaders who develop themselves is a great experience, because they are the bravest and most creative people to work for.

It's also easy to "rest on your laurels" and just focus on what needs

doing, and let personal development fall to the bottom of your to-do list. Interestingly, there's significant evidence that a leader who invests in personal and professional development (like you are by reading this) has a happier team because their boss has decent self-awareness, and therefore great empathy — and this increases effectiveness substantially. Best of all, it shows your team that you're "walking the walk" just like you expect them to do.

But personal development is about more than just keeping up business practices so you can be more effective at work — it also has to be about working on yourself OUTSIDE the office. This means exploring things on a personal level that help bring you more in touch with your true self. You can call this spirituality or simply just being better, but it means you understand that evolution never ends. You can keep becoming better.



HOW DO YOU START?

STEP 1

Drill Down to Your Personal Core Values

Think of this as a sort of personal audit and review. A business doesn't do well if it doesn't track inventory and routinely evaluate performance, and neither do people. So ask yourself about what's at your core; what motivates you? What aspects do you want to carry with you through the day? Here's a helpful tip to get you started: consider the things that drive you crazy in other people, and figure out if you do that too.

STEP 2

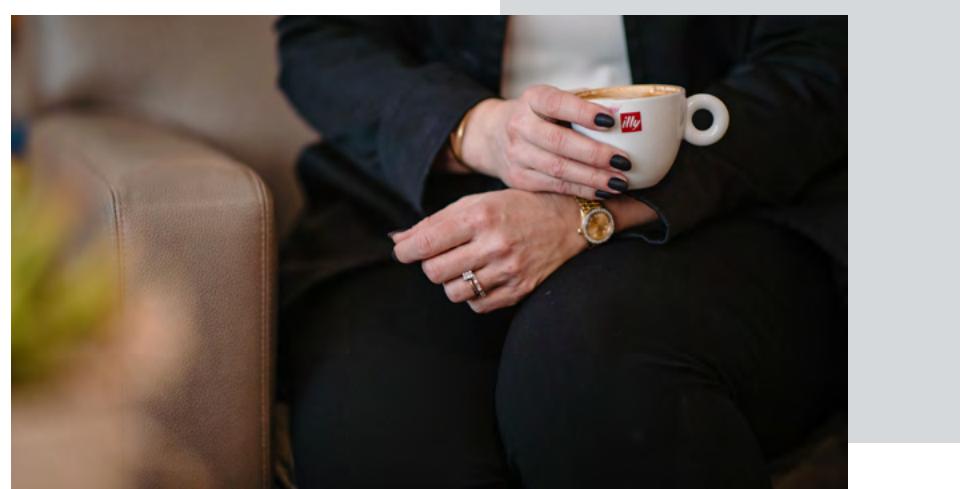
Think about Best Practices

I'll bet you keep up on all of the best practices and innovations that are happening in your role and industry. But are you keeping up on the best practices currently available for improving yourself? In his book *Mastering Self-Leadership: Empowering Yourself for Personal Excellence*, Charles Manz writes, "The instrument of leadership is the self, and the master of the art of leadership comes from the master of the self." So keep up on your personal best practices, whatever they may be.

STEP 3

Connect with a Coach

Sometimes we need a bit of help when it comes to taking a personal inventory. An objective perspective from an outsider such as an executive leadership coach (yes, that's just what I do, so shameless self-plug there) can help you figure out things like your core values and best practices. It's worth investing the time to really dive deep into what makes you, you.



STEP 4

Make Goals — and a Plan

Once you've completed 1–3 above, you'll have a pretty good idea of what your goals are. Write them down, because intention without action is, well, actually pretty useless. Once you have a solid grasp on what matters to you most and what areas of your life you want to improve, you need a plan to make it happen. Figure out what steps you'll take and what you need to accomplish your goals, and you'll be ready to go. Don't forget to revisit your goals frequently — because they will change and evolve as you do.

STEP 5

Add Personal Development to Your Schedule

Want to make growth a priority for yourself? Spend some of your time currency on it. Add your plan to your schedule and defend it as fiercely as you would defend any other item on your calendar. This is a valuable exercise, and you should treat it as something that deserves the time you'll need to spend. Working on yourself will make you a better leader, and that will get noticed.



LEARN TO BE STILL AND START MAKING BETTER DECISIONS

News anchor Dan Harris, author of *Meditation for Fidgeting Skeptics*, says, “Professionally, I think meditation has been a huge boon. It has boosted my focus and productivity while also making me less emotionally reactive. I think it has also made me calmer, more patient and generally easier to be around. In fact, I believe kindness is the most underrated professional asset in the world.”

Meditation, even if it's just a minute at a time, can center you and help you resolve stress. It's the best free medicine in the world. But best of all? Once you become accustomed to quieting down your brain regularly, you can use this ability to sit still and think when you have major decisions to make, or tricky problems that need solving.

Meditation helps us exercise the muscle that is instinct — and makes it easier to trust that your gut is nudging you in the right direction. Even more importantly, it cuts out the noise. We have so much info, bullshit, and bad advice coming at us it can be difficult to listen to your own true voice. When we have big choices to make, whether for you or your company, you can be distracted by pervasive bad thoughts. When you're able to be quiet and reflect, you can easily take down the scaffolding those negative thoughts are climbing up to infect you.

Beyond learning to trust your instincts and inner voice, being able to be still makes you a better listener — and good leaders learn to listen, both to the people in their lives and to their team at the office. Having the tools to clear your mind of distractions — a major gift of regular meditation — means you'll be able to actually hear what's said, instead of making assumptions about what will be said.

HOW DO YOU LEARN TO QUIET DOWN, MEDITATE AND LISTEN?

STEP 1

It Can Start with Just 60 Seconds

So simple, everyone can do it. Just sit still, comfortable as you can, for a full minute. You can use apps like Headspace, Buddhify and Calm to help, you can play relaxing music, or you can just sit in silence. Your brain, at first, will hop around scampering up and down your to-do list, but just let it pass. Think about those thoughts like stuff on your desktop you no longer need — just drag it to the trash.

STEP 2

Then Meditate for Longer

A study titled “Meditation Experience Is Associated With Increased Cortical Thickness” showed actual physical changes to the brain after regular practice of meditation. The study proved that meditation is actually like giving your brain a regular workout — the more often you practice, the fitter and younger your brain looks on MRI when you meditate for forty minutes a day. It’s worth it to find the time, but it might take months to be able to meditate for such long periods.

STEP 3

Sit Still for Four Minutes Before Meetings

This is a great trick I learned from Julian Treasure, a sound and communication expert, and five-time TED speaker. By spending four minutes sitting still, you’ll find your focus and retention of the information shared at a meeting goes up exponentially. This doesn’t have to be a meditative stillness to be effective, but if that works for you, go right ahead. It’s a way to reset your ears, take all the other things you’ve been working on and put them in a folder so you can be 100% present in the meeting. Your employees (and bosses) will thank you.

STEP 4

Take a Walk or a Drive

Even before you can effectively meditate, walking or taking a slow drive is a great way to take a break and shake off stress for a moment — and it’s also a great time to just simply THINK about the issue you’re trying to tackle. By taking a break you can figure out if you’re so distracted by other things that it’s impacting your ability to make a decision. Try to discern if fear is holding you back. Ask yourself if an anxious doubt you feel is true, and if not, try to find what’s fueling it emotionally. Then you can move forward with all the facts.

STEP 5

Have an Off Switch

Where do you keep your smartphone while you sleep? If it’s next to your bed, you are like most Americans today. If scrolling on your phone is the first thing you do in the morning and the last thing you do before bed, it’s time to do something differently. You need a time of day when you aren’t working. Train your staff to only reach you after hours for these four things: safety, security, revenue, and structural integrity. Anything else can wait until the next morning.

IN CONCLUSION



The through-thread of all this advice together is the fact that in order to be an effective, successful leader you need to do more than just work. You need to focus on the three core aspects of life — mind, body, and soul — to have a balanced and well rounded outlook. It is only when you turn inward that you'll find yourself achieving your dreams — and being happier in the process.

It's been my great pleasure in life to have the opportunity to teach this to the executives I coach — and I've learned just as much as I've taught. It's my sincere hope that this information helps you find your true path. Best of luck!

ABOUT KELLY

Kelly Meerbott is a respected thought leader, speaker and Leadership Coach to corporate executives. Past clients include: Virgin America, Comcast, Walt Disney World Parks & Resorts, Sony Records and Anytime Fitness, as well as niche and boutique businesses like The Ritz-Carlton of Palm Beach, the Four Seasons Boston, the British Tourism Authority, the Philadelphia Inquirer, PHL Diversity, Integrity Staffing Solutions, Universal Studios Parks & Resorts, and the PHL International Airport.

In working with executives in powerful positions, Kelly learned although these men and women knew how to run businesses, they still had obstacles thwarting their bigger vision. Kelly guides her clients through a customized change management process to improve company morale, improve productivity, achieve higher profits, streamline communications processes and eliminate politics. Kelly facilitates meaningful workplace conversations around multigenerational workforces and diversity and inclusion. She creates personal strategies and action plans to help implement long-term, positive, behavior change for corporate executives, their people and their organizations.

Contact us today to redeem your gift with download – a 30-minute phone coaching session and begin your journey to an even better YOU!

