

April 2026

Thinking Like an Attentional Leader Starts with You

How to Lead Yourself More Strategically So You Can Lead Others More Effectively

(7 minutes to read, 7 minutes to reflect, 1 minute to take a micro action)

Briefing
#11

The Questions That Press on You

Each month, these Strategic Briefs are designed to help you step back long enough to think more clearly about the issues that matter most as you lead a purpose-driven organization.

Most of the time, the questions pressing on you are organizational. How do you strengthen your business model? How do you better engage your staff, teams, members, volunteers, and stakeholders? How do you recruit stronger board members? How do you get more horsepower out of the team you have? How do you navigate cultural drag, structural friction, financial pressure, staff strain, and the growing questions around AI, talent, execution, and uncertainty?

These are real leadership questions. But they all require something of you. They require you to lead through them.

Because you are first among many of the primary drivers in the collective race your organization is running, your own condition matters more than most leaders realize. That is why, for the next three briefs, I want to step back and address something even more fundamental: what it means to think like an attentional leader.

What Is Attentional Leadership?

Over the years, I have studied and mapped a wide range of leadership competencies and frameworks. I have looked at dozens of models and roughly 125 leadership-related skills and capacities, including communication, emotional intelligence, systems thinking, resilience, critical analysis, decision-making, problem-solving, team development, self-confidence, energy management, cultural awareness, and many more.

All of them matter. But across that work, I have come to believe that there is one meta-competency sitting above them all: the ability to know where your attention should be, when it should be there, and how long it should stay there on any part of a system you are leading.

That is Attentional Leadership.

At its core, leadership is influence. Influence is shaped by attention. And attention, when directed with clarity and intention, becomes strategic focus.

Years ago, Peter Senge helped us all think more clearly about organizations as complex systems. That was, and continues to be, an important contribution. But this same systems thinking must also happen at every level—not just at the level of the organization, but at the level of self, relationships, teams, organizations, and communities.

You are not just leading a system. You are a complex system working within other complex systems. And to influence any system well, you must first learn to see it well. That includes yourself.

As a senior leader, you are one of the drivers of strategy. Your organization may have a strong mission, a capable team, a thoughtful board, a supportive community, and a well-built strategic vehicle. But no matter how good the car is, the race still depends on the driver.

If you are exhausted, scattered, emotionally reactive, misaligned, unclear, or operating below your best, it affects how you read the track, respond to pressure, prioritize, decide, and lead.

Leading Yourself First

That is why self-leadership matters so much.

It is also why the first step in thinking like an attentional leader is not merely asking what your organization needs. It is asking: Am I functioning at my best for the role I have been called to lead? Am I influencing myself to the degree needed so that I can more effectively influence others, teams, systems, and the organization as a whole?

The same process you use to lead an organization well must also be used to lead yourself well. You must know where your attention should go, when it should go there, and how long it should stay there. That is true organizationally. It is also true personally.

In my work, I often help leaders identify what I call their **WIN: What's Important Now.**

This applies at the organizational level, but it also applies at the personal, relational, team, and community levels, because each physical, social, and cultural layer affects you just as you affect it. When you are clear on your true WIN, you can organize your effort, your energy, and your time around what matters most. When you are unclear, your attention gets fragmented, and your leadership becomes more reactive than strategic.

This is why I distinguish between **Strategic Focus** and **Performance Focus**. Strategic focus is your ability to scan the larger system and identify what matters *most*. Performance focus is your ability to engage fully in the moment and execute what matters *well*.

Strategic focus helps you see and decide. Performance focus helps you drive.

You need both.

The challenge is that many leaders try to improve daily performance without first scanning the larger systems shaping that performance. They work harder, push longer, and keep moving, but they do not pause long enough to see where the real drag is coming from. Sometimes the issue is not effort. Sometimes the issue is attention. Often, the next breakthrough does not come from doing more. It comes from seeing more accurately.

Mapping the 15 Dimensions

In my doctoral research on flow, I identified 15 dimensions that influence your focus, your flow, and your capacity to lead effectively. You can think of these as 15 strategic themes that shape your leadership experience and performance.

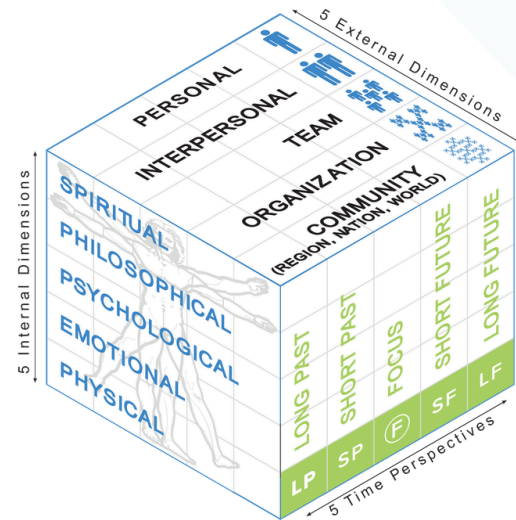
Internal Dimensions	Temporal Dimensions	External Dimensions
Physical	Long Future	Personal Environment
Emotional	Short Future	Interpersonal Relationships
Psychological	Focus (in-the-moment)	Teams
Philosophical	Short Past	Organization
Spiritual	Long Past	Community

Taken together, these 15 dimensions form a practical map for self-leadership and leading others more effectively. And when you see their interconnectivity, you are now leading at a completely different level of systems thinking.

They help you see yourself not as a flat personality profile or a bundle of isolated habits, but as a living system. Internally, they help you examine what is happening physically, emotionally, psychologically, philosophically, and spiritually.

Temporally, they help you examine how you relate to your long future, your short future, your in-the-moment focus, your recent past, and your deeper past.

Externally, they help you examine how your environment, key relationships, teams, organization, and broader community shape your flow and your leadership.



Your 15-Question Strategic Scan

For this month, I want to keep that scan simple.

Attached is a short 15-question reflection tool: one question for each dimension. The goal is not to complete a full diagnosis. The goal is to help you step back, scan yourself strategically, and notice which theme stands out most right now.

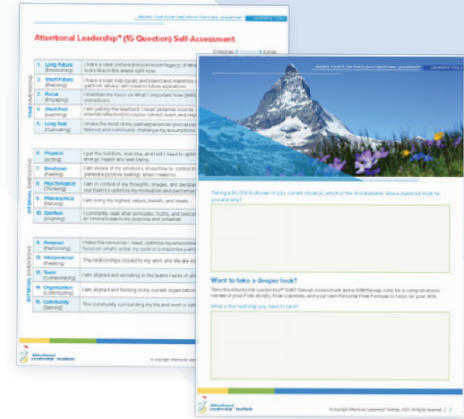
Which dimension feels strongest? Which dimension is under strain? Which dimension, if improved, would most improve your clarity, steadiness, energy, and effectiveness as a leader?

That is often where your attention needs to go next.

This is what strategic focus looks like in service of daily performance. You scan broadly. You identify what matters most. You act simply and intentionally. Then you return to the track with greater clarity.

As you complete the 15-question scan, reflect on these questions:

- Which one dimension stands out most for me right now?
- What is helping my flow the most in this season of leadership?
- What is hindering my flow the most?
- Where is the greatest source of drag in my leadership right now?
- What might improve if I gave more disciplined attention to that one dimension over the next 30 days?
- What is my current personal WIN? What is most important now for me to address in order to lead at a higher level?



Closing Thought: The Heart of Attentional Leadership

If you want to lead organizations better, you must also learn to lead yourself better. If you want to lead yourself better, you must learn to see yourself more clearly.

You are not merely a leader working in a system.

You are a complex system influencing other systems.

The better you become at seeing where your attention should go, when it should go there, and how long it should stay there, the better you will become at leading yourself, leading others, and leading the mission you serve.

That is the heart of attentional leadership.

Warmly,



Bruce H. Jackson, MBA/MPA. Ph.D.
Principal
Attentional Leadership Institute

If this brief raises something meaningful for you and you would like to take a deeper look, I would be glad to walk you through the more in-depth assessment and help you identify the themes and factors most relevant to your leadership right now.

Also, this summer I will be hosting a live Finding Your Flow experience. If this brief resonates with you, I would be happy to have you join virtually as my guest.

1-Minute Micro Action:

Now take one more step.

Identify the one dimension that would make the biggest difference right now, then complete this sentence:

“Over the next seven days, the simplest next step I can take to strengthen this dimension is: _____”

Keep it small. Keep it real. Keep it actionable.

A well-placed act of attention often creates more meaningful momentum than a broad intention with no execution behind it.

Attentional Leadership™ (15 Question) Self-Assessment

Disagree ← → Agree
1 2 3 4 5

TIME DIMENSIONS

1. Long Future (Envisioning)	I have a clear picture (mission/vision/legacy) of what success looks like in this arena right now.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Short Future (Planning)	I have a road map (goals and plans) and maximize my time to get from where I am towards future aspirations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Focus (Engaging)	I maintain my focus on What's Important Now (WIN) and avoid distractions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Short Past (Learning)	I am getting the feedback I need (external sources and internal reflection) to course correct, learn, and improve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Long Past (Cultivating)	I make the most of my past experiences (successes & failures) and continually challenge my assumptions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

INTERNAL DIMENSIONS

6. Physical (Acting)	I get the nutrition, exercise, and rest I need to optimize my energy, health and well-being	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Emotional (Feeling)	I am aware of my emotions, know how to control them, and generate positive feelings when I need to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Psychological (Thinking):	I am in control of my thoughts, images, and perspectives and use them to optimize my motivation and performance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Philosophical (Valuing)	I am living my highest values, beliefs, and ideals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Spiritual (Aligning)	I constantly seek after principles, truths, and best practices as I move towards my purpose and potential.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS

11. Personal (Performing)	I have the resources I need, optimize my environment, and focus on whats under my control to maximize performance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Interpersonal (Relating)	The relationships closest to my work and life are excellent.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Team (Collaborating)	I am aligned and excelling in the teams I work in and serve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Organization (Contributing)	I am aligned and thriving in my current organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Community (Serving)	The community surrounding my life and work is optimal.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>