

# Winning from the inside

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## Insights from a year of coaching CEOs

**Pratap Nambiar**

As 2015 comes to an end, I did some reflection based on all the CEOs I coached this year.

What was obvious was that there was a common thread running through all those interactions. In almost every single case, there was an acknowledgement that the external environment was getting way too complex to manage and that, to a large extent, their own inability to perform to their fullest potential was a consequence of the uncertainty, the enhanced competition, the extreme volatilities, and, of course, the increased complexity of doing business.

The locus of control from which they were operating was largely external. The external environment was controlling them. They were subject to all the external challenges that interfered and managed to derail all their best efforts at achieving their business performance goals. The tendency was always to look outside, to see how things happened to them in ways that were unexpected and unplanned.

A great example of this leadership belief and associated behaviours was mentioned by Rob Hughes in his The Straits Times column (Dec 19) when he commented on the sacking of Jose Mourinho as the leader of the Chelsea Football Club.

For the uninitiated, Chelsea was the champion football team of the English Premier League last year when Mourinho led them with great panache to the title, with a significant gap between his team's performance and the next best. This year, however, the same champion team with the same players and the same leader fell so fast and so sharply in performance that it astonished every football fan around the world.

"Playing the blame game", said Hughes, was a big mistake. Mourinho said his players had let him down, in fact they had betrayed him. It was them who, in spite of his best efforts, managed to lose game after game, and all his wonderful plans and great experience had come to naught. Each time his team lost, he was critical and distant, allowing his arrogance to systematically break off his relationship with his team. In fact, he even went so far as to say that last year he had managed to overachieve with this team largely because of his masterful leadership.

In the corporate world, too, we see the same challenges. When leaders do not perform, and get sacked in the process, it is never for their lack of competence, or drive, or lack of knowledge. It is almost invariably their inability to get their team to perform to their fullest potential. They lost it in their minds, and began to blame external factors for everything that did not happen the way they expected. They just could not win over their boards, their direct reports or anybody on whom their success depended.

In recent times, we have seen Mattel's Bryan Stockton, McDonald's Don Thompson, Alibaba's Jonathan Lu, HTC's Peter Chou, Al Jazeera's Ehab Al Shihabi and Bonobos founder Andrew Dunn all move out of CEO roles fundamentally because they could not find a way to connect with their people and get them to deliver the results they had committed to.

Management guru Ram Charan, who has studied this space extensively, has written that in most cases it is a failure of execution, not strategy. Leaders tend to either hang on too long to people who are non-performers or just do not know how to coach them to raise their level of performance.

The most critical part of closing your performance gap is to actually see it - not in terms of the outcomes (Mourinho saw that in all the lost games), but in terms of self-awareness. What has been your role in the results you are getting?

This is the inner game which takes place in the mind of the leader and those who work for him. It is the state of being, the patterns of actions and habits of mind which can inhibit excellence in performance.

Are you or your team playing to win or are you playing not to lose?

Erica Ariel Fox in her book *Winning From Within* talks about what you should be doing and what you really end up doing which creates the performance gap. This is a result of the state of mind that makes you stumble because of what is going on inside you. You are getting in your own way without even realising it.

Self-awareness is the foundation on which the leader builds his or her attitude and mindset which connects to his or her values and beliefs. Together it constitutes your inner operating system, your consciousness, your state of being.

Distilling all of this, what I have found is that there are three clear ways of knowing how your inner game, your state of mind, is dealing with the complexities of the external world.

**Just observe where you spend your time, or rather how best you manage time; how you manage people, or how you are able to motivate them to feel your passion and take ownership of their goals; and, finally, how you make choices and decisions that are consistent with your vision, without getting so embroiled in your short-term current reality.**

In the words of the poet Rumi: "When I was clever I thought I would change the world, then I got wise and decided to change myself."

- **The writer is the founder and chairman of Thought Perfect Pte Ltd, a Singapore-based business performance coaching organisation for CEOs.**

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of *The Sunday Times* on December 27, 2015, with the headline 'Winning from the inside'. [Print Edition](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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