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TRAINING  
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MAGAZINE

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The

# Dimensions of Character Fitness

and How They Grow  
Leadership Agility

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By Pam Boney

## First, Dare to Imagine:

Imagine working on a team where your uninterrupted creative time is sacred, and you spend chunks of time engrossed in exploring your ideas. You wake up after a good night's sleep knowing you'll have the time to bring your ideas into reality. Everyone is aware of your crucial role in accomplishing the creative purpose to which you are all devoted.

Imagine working on a team where your colleagues have great respect for your contributions, and you never worry about them hurting you. What you do well is valued, and nobody expects you to be good at everything. You know everyone generously contributes to making your work even better.

Imagine working on a team where accomplishing results and faster progress are the only reason you ever have meetings. Transparent systems ensure everyone is responsible and held accountable. Everyone agrees to make decisions based on the given information and will adapt if we learn something different later.

Imagine working on a team that stays radically focused on crucial priorities and no one tries to be everything to everyone. Everyone knows your core competencies and what you need to succeed, so everyone is selective about expending resources.

## Now, Reflect on How to Lead a Team Like This:

First, you must think about what makes your team members tick. How can you best support them? Who do you need to be to help them accomplish your most compelling purpose?

Teams like this are so committed that they devote passionate, discretionary effort into their work every day. They have something to prove. They want the world to be better in some way.

Teams like this move dirt. Build stuff. Invent things. Solve problems. Catalyze change. Challenge old conventions. Disrupt corruption. Produce new energies. Most of all, they give us hope for our future. They inspire us to believe again. They help us decide to be part of the solution instead of giving up.

## How are They Able to Accomplish so Much, so Fast?

The nascent field of neuroscience is discovering some answers about why some people and teams make the most of their potential while others fade into mediocrity. In short, they use four essential neural processing networks to help them optimize their energy and efforts. And perhaps even more importantly, these networks help them know what must be avoided at all costs. They know that fear is distracting and that strength is empowering. So, they create an environment where fears are processed

respectfully, but quickly, and strengths are optimized at the same pace. They know that ego-sensitivities just slow things down. So, they have a plan for how to glean the value out of natural fears while moving forward anyway.

**BEING PART OF A TEAM  
AND KNOWING THAT  
OUR CONTRIBUTION  
MATTERS MOTIVATES  
US TO SERVE  
ONE ANOTHER.**

## What Makes These Teams Different?

There's an underlying engine that drives the immutable passion of these teams

and enables them to transcend more primal human desires. It is the one capacity that is uniquely human and sustainably good for all of us: character strength. And if you are to lead a team like this, you need to be incredibly fit in four very important ways:

### 1 | Inspirational Fitness

Meta-Strength: Resilience (Spirit)

Character Strengths: Openness, Inspiration, Creativity

When our minds are at peace and free to wander, we have the space to imagine beyond our immediate senses and ego-needs. In modern brain science, we're learning that this ability is only possible when our "default network" is engaged. This network is a complex set of brain parts that "light up" when we are not engaged in tasks or experiencing external stimuli. When we're in this default state, we can ruminate on topics that interest us and imagine what we might do with them. This part of our brain imagines what is possible and

## THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF CHARACTER FITNESS

Agile leaders and their teams make optimal use of four essential neural processing networks to help them know what to avoid and what to do for the best outcomes. Agility in each of these four dimensions of character fitness enables leaders and their teams to thrive in a world of constant change.

TO DEVELOP	PRACTICE	AVOID
Inspirational Fitness	Freedom, ideas, creative offline time, trust in ultimate productivity	Excessive meetings, constant interruptions, fear about empowering others
Emotional Fitness	Trust good intentions, forgive mistakes, appreciation, inclusion, harmony	Blame games, triangulation, dismissiveness rewards that cause internal competition
Instinctual Fitness	Notice sensations, listen to hunches, be direct and courageous, decide and engage	Impulsivity, inaction, conflict-aversion, risk-aversion, lack of accountability
Rational Fitness	Radical prioritization of initiatives systemic disciplines, lean teams, good data analysis	Competing priorities, conflicts of interest, unrealistic goals, unrealistic timelines

seeks solutions to improve our well-being. This ingenious ability to improve our circumstances is, in itself, inspiring. It's what we must use if we expect teams to do great things under our leadership.

## 2 | Emotional Fitness

Meta-Strength: Humanity (Heart)

Character Strengths: Trust, Empathy, Likability

When we feel appreciated and valued by others for who we are, we're able to work with them in ease and trust. Not having to prove to others that we're superhuman or perfect rewards us with their acceptance. Being part of a team and knowing that our contribution matters motivates us to serve one another. In modern brain science, this is called the Reward Network, which is the set of systems that continuously seeks pleasure and avoids pain. Since we are social beings, this part of us seeks connection with others for pleasure and experiences rejection as painful. Indeed, our dependence on one another for survival is an important behavioral motivator. Similarly, emotional intuition is crucial to our ability to lead interdependent teams effectively.

## 3 | Instinctual Fitness

Meta-Strength: Courage (Gut)

Character Strengths: Integrity, Boldness, Confidence

When we follow hunches that come from well-informed instincts, we are using heuristics (rules of thumb) to make decisions faster. If we conducted a thorough analysis every time we made a decision, our brains would be overwhelmed. Modern brain science calls this the Affect Network. It activates physical responses to common, previously experienced patterns of incoming stimuli. The emotions that result from those "good" or "bad" experiences are much faster than conscious thought. They apply meaning to that stimuli, which helps us determine

whether it will ultimately make us feel good or bad. These hunches are shortcuts based on a database of good and bad experiences over a long period of time. They play an important role in our decision-making if we learn when to trust them and when to re-examine them. Fit leaders need to stop and listen to warnings from a variety of perspectives instead of moving forward impulsively on a hunch alone.

## 4 | Rational Fitness

Meta-Strength: Wisdom (Head)

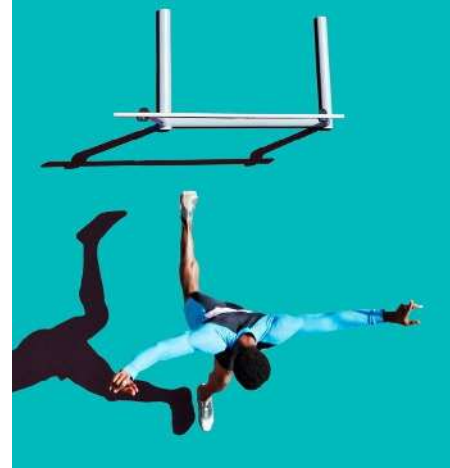
Character Strengths: Perspective, Focus, Discipline

When we use our minds to focus on goals and use rational judgment to weigh the long-term consequences of our impulses, we are selective about how to use our limited resources. Since we cannot possibly solve every problem in the world, we must be wise enough to focus our resources on those we most need to accomplish. In brain science, this complex self-regulation process is referred to the Control Network. It enables us to align our behaviors with our most important goals and hold conceptual goals in our minds while organizing and completing tasks that require in-the-moment concentration. Developing mindfulness practices helps us accomplish goals through mental discipline. As we focus on the task at hand, we can simultaneously and selectively search for new stimuli and decide whether it's useful to the overarching goal and should be quickly incorporated. As leaders, this selectivity allows us to delay gratification in service of a longer-term outcome.

## The Ultimate Character Strength Challenge

These four dimensions of character fitness enable human creativity, accomplishment and sustainability over time. Without balanced strength in each of them, we fall prey to our ego-fears about loss of approval, status, power and

FOCUS WHERE YOU  
HAVE THE MOST  
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recognition. This wastes precious time that could be applied to our goals. Being fit leaders requires each of us to commit to building our own character strengths so that we can evolve and adapt to our ever-changing environment.

Remember that whenever we are finding fault in others, we are likely avoiding our own shortcomings. Instead, focus where you have the most control: over yourself and the way you lead. Everything you do to become more fit and agile in each dimension of character fitness shapes your team's climate and ultimately determines whether your team will thrive and flourish. ☺

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