

THE SAVAGE LEADER



13 PRINCIPLES TO BECOME A BETTER
LEADER FROM THE INSIDE OUT

DARREN REINKE

**** SAMPLE ****

SAVAGE PRINCIPLE #9

SEEK OUT DISCOMFORT TO DRIVE GROWTH

“Growth and comfort don’t co-exist. That’s true for people, companies, nations.”

Ginni Rommety

As we become established in our careers, our growth tends to stagnate. We settle into routines doing many of the same tasks, day after day and year after year. We also take fewer risks such as leading ambiguous, challenging projects or taking on elevated roles associated with a high degree of failure. We may do so out of fear of tarnishing our well-crafted reputations. We may have greater family responsibilities and growing financial commitments.

Compounding the personal growth plateau is often the lack of true coaching and training provided by companies. At best, most companies equip their employees for the jobs they have and the skills needed in the moment, not for what could be coming or the agility needed for an uncertain future.

Savage Leaders find ways to continue to grow, both to succeed in their current organizations and to ensure a continued upward career arc. Finding and embracing opportunities that create discomfort is a pathway to ongoing growth and development.

FIND COMFORT IN THE DISCOMFORT

Navy SEALs are famous for thriving in hostile, chaotic situations, where conditions change minute-to-minute. In reflecting back on his career, Thaddeus, a former Navy SEAL told me, “The one word I would use to describe my career as a SEAL is ‘uncomfortable.’”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Throughout SEAL training there was constant discomfort, Thaddeus told me. Shivering and cold in the San Diego surf. Rolling around in the sand and getting covered head to toe with it—what SEALs dub a “Sugar Cookie.” Carrying around heavy logs, suffering extreme fatigue, and sleep deprivation in an exercise called “Log PT.”

To make things worse, the exercises constantly change to maximize the difficulty and push SEALs to their mental and physical limits. The notoriously hellish BUD/S training is designed to help SEAL team members develop a mindset of “comfort in the discomfort.”

The constant pain and discomfort that SEALs experience during training isn’t without its merit. It is intended to mirror the conditions SEAL teams will experience on deployments: less than ideal sleeping conditions, extreme temperatures, and the mental stress of war and constantly changing battlefield situations.

“People always ask me, ‘How real are the movies?’” Thaddeus continued. “Some are pretty accurate, but they only show a short montage of the cool stuff that we do as SEALs. They don’t show the five hours riding in a tiny boat being cold, soaked, and seasick that comes before doing the cool things.”

The ability to handle unremitting change and discomfort also enables SEALs to learn new tasks in real-time in a pressure-filled environment. As a SEAL sniper, Thaddeus regularly had to learn how to work with new weapons and systems. To do so, he leaned on his ability to deal with change and discomfort. Being confident despite a bevy of new variables allowed him to take on new, challenging tasks that ultimately supported his success as well as that of his team.

Learning to manage through discomfort also supports good decision making amid “the fog of war,” where there is never a clear picture of what the enemy is doing while the conditions on the ground rapidly change. Training for discomfort allows SEALs to confidently make decisions despite an imperfect view of the battlefield, enemy locations, and exit routes. In Iraq, Thaddeus was tasked with building tactical plans for a rapid response team, which factored in the uncertainty of enemy activity. Success required a level of comfort with less than perfect information and creating 80 percent of the solution where the remaining 20 percent would be figured out on the fly.

Having confidence amid the uncertainty allowed Thaddeus and his team to successfully lead missions while minimizing casualties for both American soldiers and Iraqi civilians.

Key Takeaway

Frequent exposure to new and uncomfortable situations fuels growth by allowing us to practice new behaviors and skills that build muscle memory and confidence. As Navy SEAL training demonstrates, regular discomfort also fosters a mindset of “comfort in the discomfort,” which enables SEALs to be equipped for change and uncertainty, leading to learning and better decision-making when conditions are constantly shifting.

As a Savage Leader, you can also benefit by immersing yourself in dynamic environments that are constantly changing and that require you to gain comfort in the discomfort. You can train for discomfort by taking on projects outside of your role at work or by challenging yourself outside of your job. You can: sign-up to speak to new groups on topics outside of your sweet spot; write a book or blog on subjects unrelated to your job; take classes in computer science, anthropology, and epidemiology or other subjects outside your traditional zone; or take on new health and fitness challenges.

Stepping outside of your comfort zone will help you to create mental agility while becoming more comfortable in constantly changing environments. This will yield better performance during times of uncertainty and rapid change in a work context—you’ll already have trained for change, so you’ll know how to overcome and manage any fear, uncertainty, or unpredictability.

Savage Leaders seek out dynamic, rapidly changing environments to gain comfort with change and to develop the ability to adapt to an uncertain workplace and future.

JUST SAY YES

As I sat in the back of the conference center, my palms were sweating and my heart pounded as stress induced adrenaline surged through my body. I had spoken in front of large groups in the past, but this was the biggest audience with some of the most influential executives and leaders who I had spoken to. I was also covering a new topic.

I was definitely in a state of discomfort.

*Why the f*ck do you do this to yourself, time and time again!?* I thought as I mentally ran through my 30-minute talk. I started beating myself up for all the constant challenges that I often put myself through. I regularly step outside of my comfort zone, testing myself over and over again with tasks that require me to do something new for the first time. It's hard. In that moment, I regretted saying yes to speaking at this event. I was worried that I would bomb in front of a room full of limitless business potential.

To help restore my mindset to confident and assertive, and to calm my nerves, I walked outside of the hotel, where the event was taking place, and took a slow lap around the building. Revisiting breathing techniques that I learned from Navy SEALs, I slowed my heart rate and returned to a baseline state of readiness. I reminded myself that I had thoroughly prepared for this moment. I had spent hours researching and honing my remarks for this audience. I had practiced my speech in different environments, and I had asked for feedback on my content and delivery from mentors and peers.

I was ready for the moment, and walking back into the hotel, I told myself I was ready to go—but honestly, I was still nervous.

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