



Mental Rehearsal Most Leaders Skip

Written by Cam Yenokida ©2025



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Elite performance starts with a picture in the mind. Build it deliberately before the moment arrives - that's the rehearsal most leaders skip.

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"Champions aren't made in gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them - a desire, a dream, a vision."
– Muhammad Ali

She ran into my room glowing.

My oldest daughter had just finished her visualization practice — something we had started building together as she entered competitive gymnastics. I would encourage her to spend the last few minutes before sleep picturing herself in full detail: the warm-up, the lights, the music, walking to the event, watching the judges signal her to begin. Everything.

I was reading quietly in bed when she burst in, too excited to stay still. "Dad, I could like feel exactly what I was doing. It was so cool."

Big hug. Big kiss. And just like that, a small lesson became something real.

What separates the leaders who perform at their best in their highest-pressure moments from those who prepare just as hard but come up short?

The answer I keep coming back to isn't talent. It isn't effort alone. It's what happens in the mind.

Michael Jordan's buzzer-beater to eliminate the Cleveland Cavaliers in 1989 wasn't improvised. By his own account, it was a shot he had already seen going in before he touched the ball. Simone Biles is a remarkable painter — someone who has spent as many hours visualizing the perfect routine as she has performing it. The physical execution follows the mental one, not by accident, but by design.

The principle isn't confined to athletics. When Satya Nadella became CEO of Microsoft in 2014, the company was widely seen as having lost its edge. What he understood — and has written about directly — is that a transformation of that scale can't be managed into existence. It has to be held as a picture first. He had to see a fundamentally different Microsoft before he could begin to build one. The mental model preceded the result by years.

The Picture We Carry

My father used to take me to the park when I was young. He'd stand in the center of the field, throwing the ball in the air, and I'd run circles around him — right foot, one touch, hit him in the chest. Left foot, one touch, hit him in the chest. Again and again.

He never scolded a missed pass. He always cheered for the right one.

I can still see that image today. Not the misses. The perfect pass with both feet. The times I did it right.

That's the principle. And I didn't fully understand how it applied to executive performance until years later.

I was working with a CEO preparing for a pivotal board meeting — the kind where a strategy eighteen months in the making would face its first real scrutiny. We ran through the presentation together. When we finished, I looked down at my notes. Two pages of questions to sharpen, angles to tighten, language to reconsider. Not a single line about what had been exceptional — the moments where their conviction was unmistakable, where they had complete command of the room, where the board would have followed them anywhere.

That was what we needed to be building on. And I had missed it entirely.

The lesson applies to every high-stakes leadership moment. We are wired to catalog what needs to improve. What most senior leaders fail to build with equal discipline is a vivid, specific picture of what their best actually looks like — detailed enough to call on when the pressure is highest.

"The best way to predict the future is to create it."
– Peter Drucker

Painting Forward

Over the past two decades, I've worked with senior leaders and executive teams through some of the most demanding moments a leader faces.

Before a high-stakes board presentation, I ask them to draw from a moment when they had complete command of the room — when the message landed, when the

energy shifted in their direction, when they answered the hardest question with clarity and conviction. Not a perfect moment. The truest one.

Before a difficult performance conversation — the kind where a trusted senior leader is no longer the right fit for where the organization is going — I ask them to picture the best possible version of that conversation: not the comfortable one, but the honest one that moves both parties forward with their dignity intact.

The instruction is always the same: start with what you know to be true about yourself at your best. Let that picture grow specific — the posture, the pace, the way you hold the silence after a hard question, the moment you feel the room shift. Build it in enough detail that it feels like a memory of something that hasn't happened yet.

What I've found is that most senior leaders don't struggle with the practice itself. They struggle with the permission to take their own success seriously enough to rehearse it. There is a quiet belief — persistent at every level of leadership — that preparation means identifying weakness. That rehearsing what you do well is somehow self-congratulatory, or unnecessary, or beneath where you are. It isn't. It's the practice that separates the leader who performs at their best when it matters most from the one who performs adequately and wonders why the room never quite moved the way they wanted it to.

"Everything is created twice, first in the mind and then in reality."
– Robin Sharma

Final Reflection

The leaders I've worked with who build this practice don't become different people. They become more fully

themselves in the moments that matter most. The mental picture doesn't fabricate confidence — it retrieves it. It draws from what they know to be true about themselves at their best and makes it accessible when the stakes are highest. That's the practice. Not an affirmation. Not wishful thinking. A deliberate, repeatable discipline — the same one that separates the elite performer from the capable one in every domain that demands performance under pressure.

What picture are you carrying into your most important moments? And is it the one that reflects who you are at your best?

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