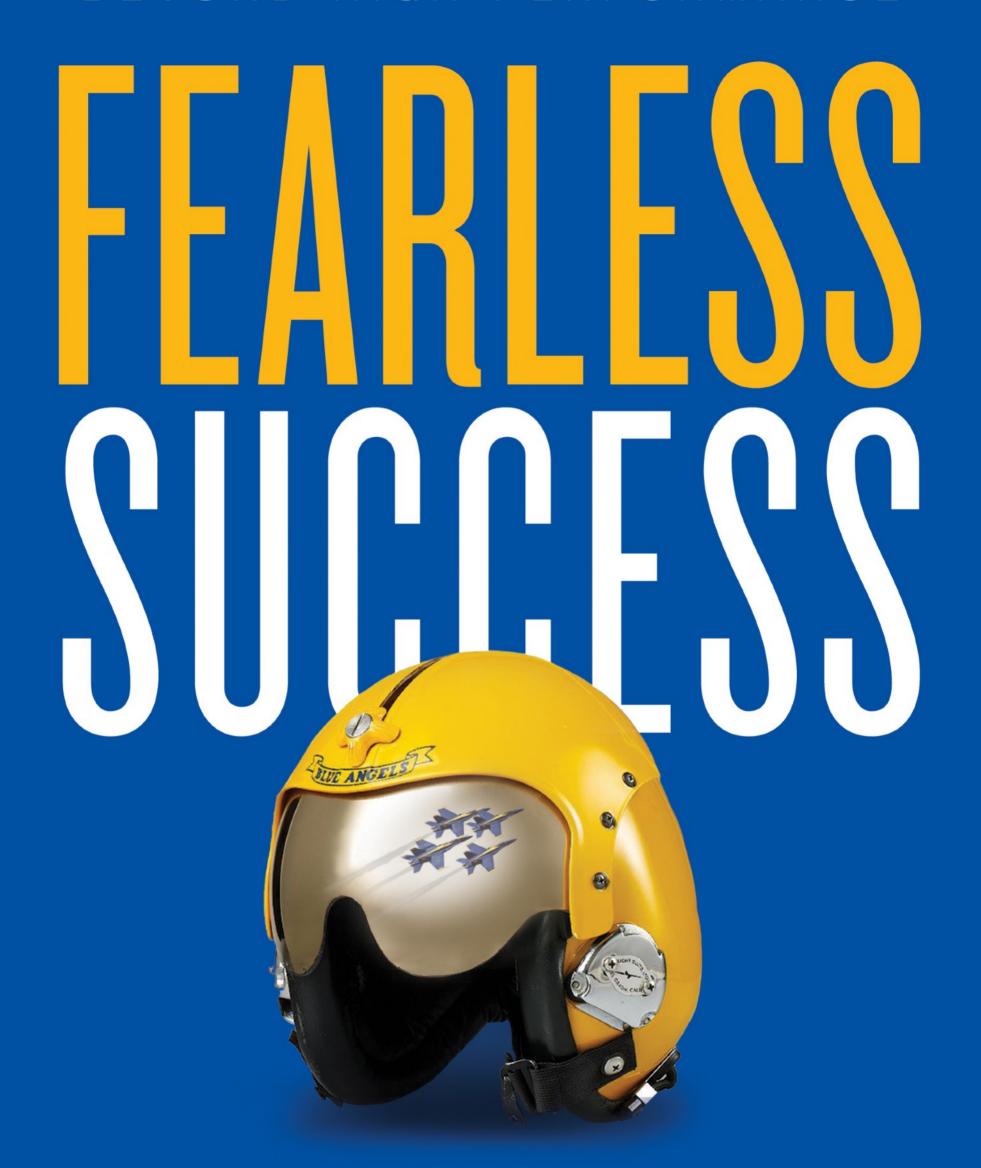
BEYOND HIGH PERFORMANCE



JOHN FOLEY

FORMER LEAD SOLO PILOT, BLUE ANGELS

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Introduction

"What began as a pursuit of aviation mastery eventually became the pursuit of mastery itself."

—John Foley

Great teams and true masters of their abilities are extremely rare. This is a book about how those individuals and teams think, act, and achieve lives filled with extraordinary results. On this journey, we'll examine the culture and the cadence that elite teams use to achieve excellence and sustain it under constant change. We'll uncover the fundamental processes and the clear mindset needed to ignite extreme high performance. And finally, we'll examine how the best of the best see things differently, and how that vision changes the world around them, allowing them to create their own destiny.

The destination is a place where beliefs, focus, trust, accountability, and gratitude converge to create a sacred space that few have experienced, but which is accessible to anyone who has a thirst for improvement.

Along the way I'll share some stories from my personal experience of elite performance. From my time landing fighter jets on aircraft carriers, to my time as the lead solo pilot of the US Navy's Blue Angels, I was allowed the honor of representing the US Navy. I learned to push my mind, my body, and one of man's greatest flying machines—the F-18—to the absolute limits of their potential. The Blue Angels are widely considered the world's premier flight demonstration squadron. Being a part of that team was the experience of a lifetime, but it was only the beginning of my journey into high performance. What began as a pursuit of aviation mastery eventually became the pursuit of mastery itself.

"As you might expect, flying with the Blues had a profound effect on me. But what you might not expect is—even more than the rarity of the flying we did—it was the experience of an elite culture of excellence and gratefulness that has had the most profound impact on my life. Becoming a Blue was a challenge in itself, and once I got there, I had to elevate my performance beyond what I thought was possible. When I realized I had the potential to achieve continuous, incremental improvement, as well as exponential shifts in thought and execution, it changed the way I understood success forever."

"The destination is a place where beliefs, focus, trust, accountability, and gratitude converge to create a sacred space that few have experienced, but which is accessible to anyone who has a thirst for improvement."

I'm thankful for what I achieved as a pilot, but the ensuing journey has given me wisdom about the nature of our capacity to succeed and improve. In fact, being a pilot with the Blue Angels was only three years of my life. Later on, I was accepted as a Sloan Fellow at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Following that, I had the opportunity to compete in the world of venture capital during the boom and the bust of the dot-com bubble. Gaining an understanding of how successful businesses and people operated—both what worked and what didn't— inspired me to take everything I'd learned as a member of an elite organization and redefine it in the context of business results.

These days, I work with some of the world's top organizations and leaders, helping them understand the mindset and processes that enable higher performance. I've been refining these concepts for decades, working to break down my unique experience of excellence

and create concepts that are easily actionable. To date I've helped more than a thousand companies make complex ideas simple and repeatable.

Lean startups, Fortune 500 companies, and world champion athletes all have something in common: a thirst for improvement that inspires them to reach the very tip of the pyramid. The approach throughout this book is based on tech"niques that the greatest teams and organizations use, and that I personally depended on in extreme situations when my life depended on precise execution. I'm going to show you how to make the complex simple, meaningful, and scalable—something that enlightened leaders know and do all the time. Each time you pick up this book, it will be like climbing into the cockpit of a Blue Angel F-18. As the canopy closes and we prepare for takeoff, I hope you feel anticipation and excitement. My genuine desire is that you and your teams will elevate your expectations and achieve your greatest dreams.

"I'm going to show you how to make the complex simple, meaningful, and scalable— something that enlightened leaders know and do all the time."

As much as it thrilled me to wear that gold helmet and blue flight suit of a Blue Angel, the thing that still captivates me today is the idea that any person, any team, and any organization can achieve higher and higher levels of performance. And I'm not just talking about more money, bigger bottom lines, and more success. I'm also talking about the place beyond high performance that is only measured inside each individual soul. Some call it life purpose, others call it personal mastery. It inspires us to reach for the horizon beyond the horizon and enter the realm of the unseen that lies beyond our expectations. That is where our path here will eventually lead.

I've seen the impact this journey can have. I've seen it in the eyes of people from all corners of the globe, across all industries, in men and women alike. I've met people after a speaking engagement who cannot wait to get home and share these ideas with their children and families. I've had people open up and share their deepest struggles and their greatest dreams, grateful for the impact and the inspiration this experience provided them. It has the power to spark a total change in your life by reigniting something already inside of you, energizing a passion and thirst for something greater than yourself that will drive every action you take, every day of your life.

Through this book I will be taking you on a ride that will challenge the way you live. My hope is that this journey will transform the way you think about business and interact with your teams. I want to ignite purpose and passion in you, your relationships, and a greater good.

It's time to strap in and take it to a whole new level.

"Burners, ready! Now!"

"Mastery inspires us to reach for the horizon, beyond the horizon, and enter the realm of the unseen that lies beyond our expectations."

CHAPTER

1

High Performance: How the Best Get Better

"Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

—T. S. Eliot"

"Ready, HIT IT!" I bark into the radio, 1/10 of a second before the blue streak of another Angel crosses over my canopy at 1000 mph closure. I feel a thump from the airflow as the two jets' shockwaves collide. We've just passed each other within a wingspan.

I'm flying 80 feet above the tarmac, moving so fast I'm covering two football fields within the span of a heartbeat. Well, maybe the span of a normal heartbeat. But this isn't normal; this is right in the middle of one of the world's most awe-inspiring air shows. When you're inside that cockpit, extreme focus, preparation, and execution have a tangible effect on reality. Everything appears to slow down as your mind speeds up.

I call on the radio, "Gucci's clear," and my wingman responds, "Thumper's clear." (Gucci is my call sign.) Simultaneously, we slam the sticks back toward our guts, propelling the nose of the aircraft up into the clear blue sky, using the full 32,000 lbs of thrust generated by the F-18's afterburners. I'm pulling 7.2 G's without a G-s 32,000 lbs of thrust generated by the F-18's afterburners. I'm pulling 7.2 G's without a G-suit, using my strength and training to bear down and squeeze my entire body—legs, arms, gut, face—grunting, straining to counter the force of gravity that's trying to drain the blood from my brain.

"Standby . . . ROLL!" I execute a 180-degree roll. I'm upside down now—still climbing at 400 knots. As I look back over my shoulder, I can see the crowd on the ground 1,000 feet below. To them, the scream of the engines gets quieter as our jets shoot upward into the sky in graceful synchronization. I call again, "Standby . . . ROLL!" bringing my aircraft back to level before I call on the radio, "Gucci's clear." My wingman responds, "Thumper's clear." Now I take another 7.2 G max deflection pull, as I alert the Boss and the diamond pilots we've finished our maneuver. The flight line is clear as we get in position for the next sequence."

"You've just experienced 16 seconds in the cockpit of Blue Angel #5, the lead solo pilot of the Navy's Flight Demonstration Squadron. This is what it's like when my wingman and I execute the "Knife-Edge Pass," one of 30 maneuvers we will perform during an air show.



When you think of the Blue Angels, what comes to mind? Your first thoughts are probably words like awe, inspiration, or excitement. When you peel back to the next layer, you start to notice things like precision, excellence, and teamwork. Those are all true of the team, but the appeal and the power of the Blues are not limited to impressive aerial maneuvers.

The team is also defined by more subtle attributes like commitment, focus, trust, and consistency. Those are the qualities that set us apart and make Blue Angel high performance unique and applicable beyond the bounds of the air show. Learning how we performed at the highest level and how we activated those qualities in the team can open your mind to new possibilities in yourself and in your team, the same as it did for me in those air shows.

Just how elite is this Blue Angel team? To put it in perspective: more than 4,000 climbers have reached the summit of Mount Everest; there are currently 2,450 active Navy SEALs; the world has seen 536 astronauts travel to outer space; and the Roman Catholic Church recently selected its 266th pope. But since our inception in 1946, there have been only 257 demonstration pilots who have flown as Blue Angels. In other words, only 0.01% of all US military pilots in history have worn the gold helmet.

During training you learn right away why so few people have done it. It's not your typical nine-to-five job. Heck, it's not typical in any regard. The standard of excellence is set to the utmost level. Yet we do it every year. Seventeen officers and 110 maintenance troops carry on a tradition, continuously refining, adapting, and raising the bar.

One major challenge of flying an air show is that mistakes have a high consequence. But once when a journalist asked me if the flying we did was dangerous, I instinctively said no, that what we did wasn't dangerous, just inherently unforgiving. That idea planted a seed that came to fruition years later when I started to ask myself why I felt that way.

It's pretty unique to feel safe when your job is to strap into a seat attached to two massive jet engines and go screaming through the sky, through cities, over water, upside down, with the belly of another jet bucking in your face an arm's length away. Granted, there is some element of that experience that my personality finds naturally exciting, and maybe you do, too; but in the moment, you don't have time to think about having fun. If you listen to the tapes of my cockpit mic when I was flying, you can hear the intensity vibrating. We're talking full-on body grunts that make you sound like a wild animal, digging your heels into the last ounce of your strength conditioning to clench every muscle in your body, fighting as hard as you can against the force of 7.2 G's. That much G-force makes it feel like a massive weight is crushing every inch of your body. It amplifies the force of gravity by 7.2 times, meaning that if you weigh 170 lbs like I did, under that much G-force you now weigh 1,224 lbs! All the while, you have to keep the jet on a precise razor's-edge flight path. When you transition out of the maneuver, it's at the exact millisecond that you've practiced thousands of times. When you come back on the radio, it's with a calm voice. "Gucci's clear."

Even knowing the danger, having experienced it moments before the interview with that journalist, the reason my mind made that distinction was that I knew something they didn't. I knew the rigors that we had all gone through before the air show that very day and in the months preceding. I knew the challenges we'd all been through in our careers as naval aviators. There were hard lessons, some learned in blood and others in the mind. We all knew the Cats and Traps1 of countless carrier takeoffs and landings, straining the eyes to find the pitching deck in the dead of night while dark, icy waters lay in wait, beckoning for a momentary lapse in concentration.

Those shared experiences formed the basis of extreme trust that the team shared. It was innate in each of us. The team dynamics were a necessary element for navigating an inherently unforgiving environment. That's true of the greater world, too. Think of the countless startups and brilliant entrepreneurs for whom success can hinge on the smallest advantage: something like a thought, an instinct, or a simple belief that they can persevere. Think of the massive global corporations struggling to align thousands of moving parts and

people, trying to adapt and lead through the speed and change of this century. If you zoom out, the world that surrounds us every day is no less extreme than the environment inside a Blue Angel air show.

Our trust in one another wasn't the only thing that allowed us to perform in extreme conditions. We also had a deep trust in the system that got us there. That system, a process and a mindset that we engaged with every single day, was designed with continuous improvement in mind. It outlined the way that we practiced and executed, and how we got prepared before every flight. It influenced all of our behaviors, both in the cockpit and in our lives generally. It allowed the team to get better month after month, day after day, even as personnel changed.

The Blues face a unique challenge that makes our process and our approach especially important. Throughout the Navy, all personnel are reassigned to a new unit every three years. For the Blue Angels, this turnover includes the maintenance crew as well as the leadership, so the structure and traditions of the team are a huge priority. Can you imagine walking into your job each year on New Year's Day to see that roughly a third of your colleagues and half of the leadership are brand new? That kind of change and growth can cause disruption if your culture and systems are not designed to handle them. In a high-performance organization, individual talents will come and go; but the culture and the process of the organization need to be so strong that change doesn't negatively impact forward motion.

For the Blue Angel demonstration pilots, the turnover is even faster. Pilots usually serve only two years, which means half the demo team is new every year. The faster transition for pilots comes from three main factors. First, the honor of serving as a Blue is something we want to share with other qualified candidates, because there are other naval aviators who have the skill to take on that precision flying and the character to adopt a purpose larger than self. That was our biggest mission, actually—to serve as the Navy's ambassadors of goodwill. It was our mission to inspire awe and dreams in people around the world, and we did it not only with air shows, but also by serving as examples of honor, courage, and commitment.

The second reason the turnover rate for Blue Angel pilots is so high relates to the stress and pace of a show season. Each year, we spend over 270 days away from home, and go more than 300 days without having two days off in a row. That kind of intensity is taxing for your body, your mind, and especially your family.

The third reason might not seem obvious: it's the risk of complacency. We all know that getting too comfortable can lead to distractions, whether it's in business or in relationships. Over time, that can lead to severe consequences. When you're flying in formation an arm's length from another jet, you need to do everything you can to make sure you are laser-focused and that complacency doesn't set in.

Establishing a process that you can trust and that everyone buys into is one of the key goals of this book—but there are two sides of the coin. The best of the best combine strong process with a distinct mindset. That's what differentiates elite performers. Your mindset defines the way you think. The way you think defines your behaviors. Your behaviors drive execution, which creates results. A mindset of caring will elevate every thought and outcome. As you'll learn, the core mindset that is woven throughout this book is embodied in a simple phrase: "Glad To Be Here." Those four words can actually change the way that you perceive the world, unlocking the potential that brings exponential results.

This combination of process and mindset is the key to activating high performance in yourself and your team. Throughout the book, I'll be sharing elements of both.

"Glad To Be Here." Those four words can actually change the way that you perceive the world, unlocking the potential that brings exponential results.

THE MINDSET: GLAD TO BE HERE®

I call the ethos that runs through this book the Glad To Be Here Mindset. This mental approach is the real game-changer. It's at the core of why high performers do what we do. This larger purpose gives us the energy to overcome even the most challenging obstacles. It's the key to resiliency. It bonds the individuals of great teams, and it lies at the heart of exceptional organizations. Glad To Be Here is the differentiator, the one thing that takes these excellent processes and inspires breakthrough results.

If you take only one thing from this book, let it be these four words. They imbue every action with a sense of purpose, possibility, and profoundness. This attitude has had the most positive impact on my life of anything I have ever experienced. I've seen it do the same in countless individuals, teams, men, women, and organizations from all walks of life in countries around the globe.

When you perceive the world through the lens of Glad To Be Here, you see things that others don't see and you have the confidence to take action. That's innovation. What one person sees as a threat, you see as opportunity. Where one person observes a struggle, you perceive just another step in the journey. Where one person feels stuck, you sense the key to transformation and innovation. This is exactly the kind of differentiator that you need if your goal is to take yourself beyond your current state. High performers see things differently.

When you perceive the world through the lens of Glad To Be Here, you see things that others don't see and you have the confidence to take action.

On the Blue Angels, we used the phrase "Glad To Be Here" at the end of our opening comments during our debriefs. These words are the sign of a culture of respect and gratitude. We all shared that purpose—from the pilots to the support crew—and it drove us to be the best we could possibly be. Our gratefulness came in part from the fact that every day we were putting ourselves in an inherently unforgiving environment, and every successful flight was something that inspired gratitude. But it also grew from the rare opportunity to serve others in one of the most thrilling and awesome ways. The Glad To Be Here mindset is more than a reaction to circumstances. When you start to understand how extreme the life of a Blue Angel pilot really is, you'll start to realize that this mindset is not the icing on the cake, but a critical foundation of the culture. In fact, it's so rooted in who we are, it helps create a purpose larger than self—to serve as ambassadors of goodwill. That higher mission is what drives us to be the best of the best.

These four words are rooted in something familiar and accessible to every single person on this planet: gratitude. In psychological terms, gratitude is special because it requires an awareness of our personal mental state. A growing body of research has established the special role that gratitude plays in the development of relationships and results. It underlies all kinds of relations, from close bonds between friends and family to professional ties we feel with colleagues or teammates. That's why Glad To Be Here is the differentiator, the spark that ignites all of the key elements that teams are looking for, such as chemistry, trust, and camaraderie. When people actively engage with this emotion and allow it to define their being, it promotes a state of mind that allows for open and honest human interactions with more efficient outcomes. This kind of activity translates directly into business results.

In addition, studies have indicated that gratitude has a contagious and cascading effect that naturally spreads beyond the initial participants, such as the far-reaching benefits of "paying it forward" found in a joint study by UC San Diego and Harvard.2 When you begin to see how powerful gratitude is, you sense how it actually fuels the journey into higher performance. This becomes the most important part of everything that you do. It can lead from success to significance.

For the more than half a million people in direct audiences that I've shared it with, Glad To Be Here becomes an awareness that you take with you into the world. It's a conscious awareness that imbues your life with positivity and growth. It's a state of mind that brings positive energy to yourself and those around you. And this energy allows you to be resilient and face challenges with grit and determination.

There is a profoundness in this state of mind, which ties back to a purpose larger than self. As you continue on this journey, Glad To Be Here will become both the how and, more importantly, the why that elevates your thoughts and your actions. Put simply and boldly, Glad To Be Here can change your life and change the world.

It's one thing to feel Glad To Be Here, but it's another entirely to share it. At the core of this mindset is gratitude, which is a social emotion. When you share the Glad To Be Here mindset with others, it has benefits for you, and for the person receiving. It's not just something you keep inside to make yourself feel good or elevate your performance, it's something you share with the world around you that can have a transformative effect on your surroundings.

Put simply and boldly, the Glad To Be Here mindset can change your life and change the world.

I've seen this cascading effect happen many times. I like to close certain sessions with what I call a "Glad To Be Here Share-out." One person begins and we go around the room, giving each person a voice to express why they are Glad To Be Here. The exercise is simple, but the emotion it draws out can be astounding. It only takes one person sharing a deep, heartfelt story, and the room completely transforms. It gives everyone a rush of connection and camaraderie, inspiring them to open themselves up and share themselves in the purest sense.

You may be thinking that Glad To Be Here sounds like the outcome of success and not the catalyst, but in my experience, it was an essential tool for achieving high performance. It may be easy to imagine feeling Glad To Be Here when everything is going well, like when business is booming or when victories come easily. But actually, Glad To Be Here is most important in times of trial. Reminding yourself of the sources of your gratitude is an awesome way to drive out fear and immobility. It connects you back to your higher purpose. It refocuses the mind on the positivity, allowing you to spot new opportunities for innovation and execution. It's the differentiator that can turn a bad situation into a great success.

When I fully embraced Glad To Be Here, my life was imbued with a purpose that pushed me to continually achieve. More importantly, it drove me to give back to the world, to inspire and to share with others. I found my life transformed by a positive emotion that seemed to change the way I thought about everything. And it was infectious, impacting everyone around me and elevating my surroundings.

The power to change a single person's life is also the power to change the world.

The power to change a single person's life is also the power to change the world. That's the level of importance that we should give to this mindset. Finding deep engagement with Glad To Be Here is natural. Think of it as a tool you can call on that will boost your performance and enhance your personal success over and over again.

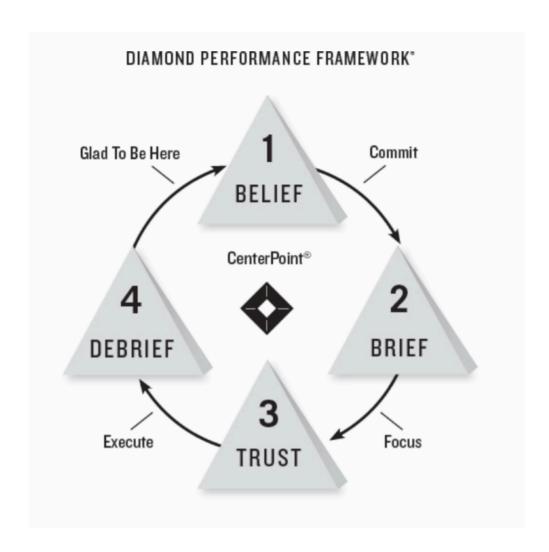
PROCESS: THE DIAMOND PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

If you want to achieve high performance, you need to pair a strong mindset with a strong process. The Diamond Performance Framework is a process built from fundamental concepts. In basic strategic management theory, success relies on four things: vision, plan, execution, and feedback. This methodology underlies the actions of most successful businesses and teams. Sometimes we refer to this as operational excellence. But at the most elite level, we think differently, we speak differently, we act differently, and we get different results. We take a unique approach to these fundamental concepts. When you're talking about how the best get better, small things matter.

The Diamond Performance Framework (or DPF) takes each of these fundamental concepts to the next level. We're not just going to talk about vision; I'm going to show you how to get commitment and buy-in to a vision. I'll take you beyond planning regimens and show you how to create focus and alignment for individuals and teams. When it comes to the task at hand, you're not just going to execute; rather, I'm going to show you how to leverage high trust to get the most from every action you take.

After you execute, you'll need to get feedback. And in the DPF, feedback plays a prominent role. I'm going to give you a method for debrief that not only examines what happened, but also allows you to reassess and helps to create a culture of accountability that breeds personal responsibility. This inspires ownership with focused actions that reverberate throughout the organization. It's also a tool for building chemistry and trust that inspires ownership.

This process is made up of various techniques that have subtle yet significant differences. This is not meant as a replacement for your current procedures. Instead, it's an enhancement designed to be overlaid onto your present operations. It was created to work with different kinds of people, and with a variety of objectives. The goal is to take your current performance and imbue it with the edge that high-performing teams use to get



ahead and stay ahead of the curve, sustaining excellence, over and over again, even through changing conditions. This approach is repeatable, it's transferable, and it works. The more you use it, the more it accelerates and spirals upward, allowing you to deal with perpetually smaller increments. As you see the increasing results, it empowers an energy that propels one to higher and higher levels, breaking belief barriers and driving exceptional performance."

ORIGINS OF THE FRAMEWORK

The DPF is more than a product of my time as a Blue Angel. When I created this system, I took the core processes we used to fly air shows and adapted them for use in business and in life. It is the combination of my rare experiences as a Blue Angel, the time I spent at Stanford business school, the lessons I learned as an entrepreneur, and the wisdom I've gained in the last two decades helping over a thousand companies reach for higher performance.

Working with other high-performance teams showed me I needed to create a framework that was repeatable in different situations, and especially in a changing environment. Just like in business, sports, or life, success is about more than achieving excellence. It's about sustaining excellence through change: changing markets, changing economies, changing people, and changing dynamics. The ability to adapt to change was central to what we were trying to achieve when I was a Blue Angel. But the ability to ignite and lead through change is what enables success in all aspects of life. The future favors the bold.

It's easy to tout the benefits, but how do you actually do this? How do you make this process and mindset part of your DNA, and part of your organization? How do you think and act Glad To Be Here in a genuine, positive way?

The future favors the bold.

For many of us, this has become the journey of a lifetime.

For me in particular, those four words that began as a simple phrase have now become the foundation of how I think, act, and speak—in all corners of my life. The same has been true for many of my clients over the years.

So, as we strap in, take a moment to pause and bask in this mindset. Imagine the things in your life that make you Glad To Be Here. Imagine the state of awe that people feel being in the audience at a Blue Angel air show, gazing up into the sky and seeing those powerful machines soar with grace and precision. Imagine what it would be like if people saw your performance— personally and professionally—in the same way. Imagine how it would feel if your actions and your attitude inspired awe in those around you.

That is what it means to achieve high performance, and it's only the beginning.

1Cats, or catapults, are used for launching jets off carriers, while traps refer to the arresting wires that stop jets when "

"they land on the carrier deck.

2From "'Pay It Forward' Pays Off" by Inga Kiderra, http://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/archive/newsrel/soc/03-08ExperimentalFindings.asp, accessed April 2018."

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