

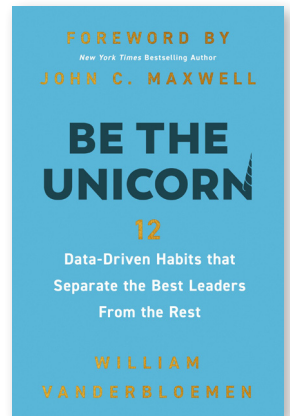


# Executive Book Summaries®

## Be the Unicorn

12 Data-Driven Habits that Separate the Best Leaders from the Rest

by **William Vanderbloemen**



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### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Have you ever met someone, and within one or two minutes, you know that they're special? That they stand out from the crowd? They are the energy in a room. They have a spark that lights up their environment. They don't seem to have trouble succeeding. And they seem to be the exception to the rules the rest of us are bound to. They are Unicorns and you can be one, too.

That may sound like a crazy promise, especially in today's hyper competitive and ever-evolving work world. But author William Vanderbloemen has found a way to achieve this, based on data collected and studied over the course of his career as the founder and leader of an executive search firm. With thousands of repetitions under his belt, he is pretty good at spotting Unicorns. In fact, he's not only learned how to spot them, but what qualities and habits they have in common. And in *Be the Unicorn: 12 Data-Driven Habits that Separate the Best Leaders from the Rest* he's going to share them with you.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why being overeager is not a weakness.
- The role agility plays in personal and corporate success.
- Why being prepared is better than playing hard to get.
- How likability trumps competence.

## The Fast

We've all been told to play it cool at some point in our lives. Looking overeager weakens your position, right? Wrong.

Speed wins.

Unicorns know this. Response time matters. In business and relationships, being quick to respond almost always pays off.

Okay, so “be responsive.” Is that it? That's it. While this seems like an easy one to hack—and indeed is the easiest of the twelve traits—it's harder than it sounds. Acting fast isn't always in our nature. Some of us come naturally to the habit of rapid response. The rest of us have to hone this skill.

There are barriers to speed but you can break them. Two things can keep you from living up to your potential as a member of the Fast:

1. Access to the opportunity
2. Fear

You can't respond quickly if you never receive the message. Maybe your phone is charging in the other room or maybe you never check your email. That's not to say you need to be accessible all the time, but you do need to allow for messages and opportunities to find you in the first place.

But being the Fast is not a matter of saying yes to everything. It's a matter of determining what your answer should be quickly. Fear can paralyze your decision-making and lead to overthinking.

Fear loves to make you overthink. Overthinking makes you safer, right? You're more likely to get the right answer or work out all the possible scenarios if you overthink. Wrong. “Thinking” is valuable. Overthinking is not. Be confident and respond quickly.

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## The Authentic

Living in the Google era means there is no hiding. Whatever secrets you have will be discovered. The delivery (or lack thereof) on whatever promises you make will be found out. Authenticity is quickly becoming a differentiator between the best candidates for jobs and the rest. So what are the ways to develop your own authentic and transparent self while maintaining your sanity and privacy?

In our online lives, pictures are polished and reality is spun. With endless Instagram filters, software, and an iso-

lated world, it's just a lot easier to look better online than you really are. But those who can develop the ability to be authentic in their work and in how they present themselves are both rare and in high demand.

The keys for authenticity are not the same as the keys for perfection. In fact, perfection can be a real turnoff. For example, have you ever been fired? Have you ever admitted it, particularly in a job interview? Most people don't.

In high stakes situations, such as job interviews, people aren't typically transparent. People aren't usually authentic. If you can spot someone who is authentic, you've spotted someone who stands out of the crowd. If you want to be a Unicorn, you need to get comfortable with authenticity. Here's how.

Don't be afraid to share examples of where you've messed up, but there's no reason to overdo it. Authentic people have a way of sharing their mistakes with humility, bringing people together. This means you do not need to put yourself up on a cross or hire a tall nun to walk next to you crying, “Shame” all the time. Admit your mistakes or that you're struggling, and move on.

Not only are these practices good for cultivating authenticity, it turns out making mistakes and owning them helps us learn and retain knowledge much better than if we'd gotten it “right” in the first place.

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## The Agile

We don't need science to tell us what we see happening in real time: Getting older means getting less agile. Every day, we lose a little bit of that flexibility, a tiny path in our plastic minds.

But the world is changing, and agility is more important than ever. No matter what the circumstances, the Agile succeed. The pandemic showed us just how important it is for businesses to be agile. “Pivoting” and innovating were the difference between thriving and folding when COVID-19 suddenly changed the way we lived. Agile businesses are the product of agile people who—and this is important—are allowed to exercise their agility in the workplace.

The Agile are generally positive people who can problem-solve. They'll roll with the changes, adapt quickly, and push back only when absolutely necessary: a hiring manager's dream.

To cultivate agility at work:

Have you ever heard the phrase “build a bridge and get over it”? That’s what agile people do when something changes.

- Don’t add waste to projects; simplify things.
- Don’t waste time during meetings.
- Don’t have meetings at all if you can help it.
- Always look for easy ways to tweak the status quo and modify processes to work for your own team’s needs.
- Don’t be afraid of upsetting others with change.
- Celebrate when being agile moves the ball.

Have you ever heard the phrase “build a bridge and get over it”? That’s what agile people do when something changes. When you’re agile, your ability to become a Unicorn increases exponentially.

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## The Solver

When faced with challenges, people can either choose to be on the problem side of the equation or the solution side. Those who choose to find solutions, who refuse to be victims, and who spend energy moving past those challenges are irreplaceable.

There is a particular mindset that is prevalent in Solvers and in a world that is moving faster and proving less certain than ever, developing this ability will raise your value like never before.

Even though there is a higher risk of error, solving is better when done with a group. Solving problems in a group can be threatening, exhausting, and frustrating, but studies show that, when they’re done right, group projects in a professional setting lead to innovation that wouldn’t otherwise have happened.

You know who does like to solve things in a group setting? Millennials. Congratulations if you’re a member of this generation. You’re more likely to be better at adjusting to whatever the workforce throws your way. You’re also better at dealing with conflict. These qualities correlate with successful workplace collaborations. Not surprisingly, millennials value collaboration and are some of the most successful Solvers.

Tips for cultivating a Solver mentality at work:

- Encourage humility and lifelong learning.
- Celebrate Solver victories and give credit to individuals where it’s due.
- Ask that staff bring solutions to the table at each meeting; even if they’re bombastic and unachievable, it puts them in the right mindset.
- Language counts: rebrand “problems” as “possibilities.”

Being a Solver will help you go far, particularly if you solve collaboratively. People who lead with “we” are both exceptional and amazingly valuable in whatever situation they find themselves in.

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## The Anticipator

There are some people who develop the ability to see what’s coming next; to read minds and trends well enough to be able to “see around the corner.” They’re Anticipators. Those who anticipate rise above the crowd. They actually do almost see the future. You can too.

Our brains are the ultimate anticipators. Author Lisa Feldman Barret has done extensive research on this. She writes, “In a very real sense, predictions are just your brain having a conversation with itself. A bunch of neurons make their best guess about what will happen in the immediate future, based on whatever combination of past and present that your brain is currently conjuring.”

This feature of our brains has helped us out for as long as people have been on this earth. In modern times, our brains are still at it, helping us survive today’s perils. You don’t need to have any special psychic ability or gift. Anticipation is something that you have to practice, focus on, and develop. Not by looking way out into the future but by seeing what’s right in front of you.

You can learn to be a better Anticipator by knowing yourself, your history, and your surroundings. Another big part of being an Anticipator is knowing you can’t anticipate

everything and being able to adjust quickly. Anticipators are cool, calm, and collected. At least that's what they appear to be. This helps in winning over everyone they engage with.

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### The Prepared

Luck happens to the prepared. Those who do their homework always have a leg up. But in today's world, learning how to prepare for a job, an interview, and a relationship has changed drastically. Being prepared in the new world is a key to rising above the ordinary crowd.

The founder of the Scouts, Robert Baden-Powell, chose Be Prepared as the organization's motto. It means, he wrote, "You are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty; be prepared in mind by having disciplined yourself to be obedient to every order and also by having thought out beforehand any accident or situation that might occur, so that you know the right thing and the right moment, and be willing to do it."

We can take the "be obedient to every order" part out of our definition, but thinking things out beforehand is definitely the jam of Unicorns.

When a candidate has shown that they've put in the work to learn about your company, they have an obvious advantage over candidates with a more nonchalant attitude. Playing hard to get doesn't often work with hiring managers. Best to wear your heart on your sleeve and show up more prepared than a Scout.

How to cultivate preparedness at work:

- Encourage "opposition research." It's not enough to know your position on a topic; the top 1 percent know their opponents' objections and are ready to handle them.
- Practice poking holes in plans and ideas in a constructive way. This will help your team get thinking of and prepared for all scenarios.

Prepared people do their homework before interviews, meetings, and presentations. Like the Anticipators, the Prepared also see the whole picture. They inspire confidence and have an easier time gaining buy-in.

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### The Self-Aware

The world has never been noisier or busier. Having the abil-

ity to be self-aware, to know weaknesses, to realize where you are in a crucial conversation is perhaps rarer than ever. Learning the process of self-awareness will cause you to stand out in a noisy, busy crowd.

Socrates didn't write much (if anything) down, but his most famous advice lives on as some of the best: "Know thyself." Those who are familiar with their strengths and weaknesses and who are honest with themselves are most likely to be Unicorns.

Self-awareness isn't just nice to have. Sure, it makes your life easier and the lives of anyone you interact with easier. How many of us wish houseguests were more self-aware when deciding how long to stay at our homes? Self-awareness, like so many of the traits Unicorns have, is a survival skill.

When you're self-aware, you're not going to put yourself in danger or set yourself up for failure. Knowing your strengths will allow you to position yourself for the win. To know what you can confidently and capably do is essential to standing out.

Being self-aware also makes you better at finding solutions. Knowing yourself comes with a guaranteed pinch (or more) of humility, so when a self-aware person is faced with a challenge, they can decenter themselves from the issue. Being self-aware is knowing all about you while knowing that it's not all about you. Whatever the crisis, the Self-Aware remain even-keeled and committed to the goal.

Self-awareness is the key to a lot of happiness, too. People who are self-aware are more creative, more effective at their jobs, better at relationships, better leaders, and more likely to be promoted. When it comes to knowing yourself, ignorance is not bliss.

Cultivate self-awareness by practicing humility and patience, trusting others to help, learning your limits, and pushing yourself to grow.

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### The Curious

Many of humanity's greatest minds, from Socrates to Einstein, celebrate curiosity as a key factor of success. But being curious is hard. We're not being offered potions to drink and rabbit holes to climb into at every turn, after all. And what's surrounding us on a regular basis is mundane. It's boring. Can we be expected to simply cultivate curiosity out of nothing?

While many of the other twelve traits of the Unicorns are learned over time, curiosity is one that comes as a factory setting.

Absolutely! You don't need to have curiosity thrust upon you. You can make your own. You can learn to find even the most prosaic interesting, ask questions, and listen to the answers with interest. This is what Unicorns do.

All of us are born with curiosity. While many of the other twelve traits of the Unicorns are learned over time, curiosity is one that comes as a factory setting.

Curiosity is any time we take a genuine interest in someone, become absorbed with a show on the nature channel, or get caught up in our kid's research project. Curiosity is looking around us and letting our brains be captivated.

Our brains actually reward us for being curious with a boost of dopamine. Research has also shown that curiosity is good for our mental health. Anxiety, for example, is not compatible with the feel-good, mental high-fiving your brain does when you're wondering and discovering.

It's not always easy to remember to be curious. Life gets in the way. A lot. But as much as you can, follow the advice of author Clarissa Pinkola Estés when she says, "Practice listening to your intuition, your inner voice; ask questions; be curious; see what you see; hear what you hear. . . These intuitive powers were given to your soul at birth."

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## The Connected

It's always been about who you know. Connections are king, especially when it comes to getting ahead. Think of connections as relationships you can build from anywhere. Being connected is about more than what powerful and influential people you can network with. It's about being a good person to all people because you never know where your life may lead.

Experts estimate that between 75 and 80 percent of jobs are won thanks to personal or professional connection. Networking is more important than ever. But knowing people isn't always enough. You can be in the same room as someone or be "friends" on all the social platforms, but if you can't connect on a human level, you're not going to succeed.

Hiring managers possess better-than-average judgment of character, but they still appreciate people vouching for a candidate. Even better, when a position opens up, they can always rely on the Connected to spread the word and get good names in the ring.

Tips for cultivating connection at work:

- Offer referral bonuses for team members who recommend good candidates.
- Encourage networking; give team members allowances for professional memberships and conference attendance.
- Mentor, mentor, mentor.

Life isn't a straight line. It's a spiral. While you're climbing the mountain of success, seek connection with others. Always err on the side of sending the text or forwarding an email if it means it might help connect someone you know with someone who needs it. Sixty seconds of your time could change someone's life, so make the effort. Being kind has a shelf life, and if your connections think of you as one of the good ones, all kinds of doors will be opened to you.

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## The Likable

It's amazing how often the candidate that prevails is simply defined by "plays well with others." Many companies end up having to fire (or wishing they could fire) a "brilliant jerk" on staff. But the Likable have the ability to stay employed and even get promoted simply through relational equity, a store of goodwill built up with another person over time.

Learning to be likable is easier than you might imagine and with a crowded, noisy world, this trait may end up being more important than any other.

Likability trumps competency almost every time. Stay likable and the doors will be flung open wide. What's more, your likability will protect you from the consequences that may come with not being quite as competent.

Have you ever noticed that likable people really never talk about themselves but always turn the conversation toward

you? Think about how this principle could help you in your professional life. In sales meetings, think how you can turn the conversation back toward the customer. In leadership situations, share stories and examples of other team members' wins. When you're speaking your vision for your organization's future, make it about everyone in the room.

Being likable isn't the same as being a people pleaser. People pleasing comes from fear. Being likable comes from confidence. If you're worried about crossing over into people-pleasing territory on your journey to perfect your likability, don't be. As long as you have healthy self-esteem and your likability is an expression of your true self, you won't become a people pleaser.

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### The Productive

Being productive is about making the best use of your time and distinguishing yourself among the crowd. It's all too easy to kick projects down the road and let distractions get the best of you.

With the rise of social media, instant messaging, and an on-demand world, attention spans are falling like a stone. More time gets wasted than ever in the workplace. Conversely, when a productive person shows up to a job or task, they shine brighter than ever.

There's not a one-size-fits-all prescription for productivity, but there are some key guidelines to follow. Being productive comes down to a few factors:

- Knowing how you work best
- Staying organized
- Valuing outcomes over output

You've got to know how to set yourself up for productive success. This comes down to letting your brain do what your brain does best, without distractions, and finding the right circumstances for that. If you have the option of working from home or not, it's important that you know which situation suits you better. When at work, keep track of your productivity during the day. Find out when it's highest and when you're in a slump. Plan accordingly.

Most people have their own system of to-do lists and productivity strategies that work for them. Apps, email reminders, pen and paper—it doesn't matter how you do it; the important thing is that you do it to stay organized.

Metrics certainly have their place, but measuring produc-

tivity in output is outdated. What really matters are the outcomes, not the output. There's not a lot of room for creativity, discovery, or innovation when output is being tracked. When outcomes are the concern, however, then true, meaningful productivity can happen.

Unicorns are not only productive; they know the best ways to become productive.

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### The Purpose Driven

Some people are driven by a well-defined cause that supersedes money. Developing your sense of "why" will accelerate the "what" that you do in a way that makes you winning and irreplaceable.

You don't need a disaster on a global scale to be purpose driven. Common, everyday goals drive the Purpose Driven; the only difference is that these goals add up to more than the sum of their parts.

Unicorns know that professional success depends on two things:

1. You have a strong sense of purpose.
2. You find an organization whose purpose aligns with yours.

McKinsey did a deep dive on purpose in the workplace post-pandemic. They found that COVID-19 caused an estimated two-thirds of workers to reevaluate their purpose at work and in life. (Hello, Great Resignation.) This was a good thing as it forced both individuals and organizations to uncover and define what their purpose was.

The McKinsey research found that when employees feel that their purpose is aligned with their organization's, benefits include "stronger employee engagement, heightened loyalty, and a greater willingness to recommend the company to others." When you have a purpose and when you find an organization that shares that purpose, you both benefit.

Tips for cultivating a purpose-driven workplace:

- Have absolute clarity in your mission.
- Understand what motivates you and what motivates your team.
- Celebrate when you "catch" team members living the purpose.

To be purpose driven, it's essential that you know yourself

well enough to know your passions and interests. Purpose comes from within. Once you have your purpose, hold onto it, and keep it front of mind. Distill it into as few words as possible and then drill it home at every opportunity. Unicorns are very clear on their purpose.

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### What's Next?

The Unicorn Tapestries are a series of intricately woven wall hangings made at the turn of the sixteenth century depicting a unicorn and its capture. Although his story is fraught with hunting dogs, people clamoring for a grasp of his magical horn, and his actual death, the final panel shows the restored-to-life unicorn content in his new position, wearing an expensive collar and sitting idyllically under a tree.

People wanted this unicorn. People sought out this unicorn. Now, the unicorn sits in a place of honor, celebrated and valued by people who know how special he is.

You can stand out, be special, and succeed, no matter what comes your way. We can't predict the challenges that await us, but we can be ready for them. Develop and grow these traits, and you will be more than ready: you'll be a leader, a sage, and a visionary.

You'll be a Unicorn.



William Vanderbloemen has combined over 15 years of ministry experience as a Senior Pastor with the best practices of executive search to provide faith-based organizations a unique offering: a deep understanding of local church and theology with the very best knowledge and practices of professional executive search. Prior to his founding Vanderbloemen Search Group, William studied executive search under a mentor with over 25 years of executive search at the highest level. His learning taught him the very best corporate practices, including the search strategies used by the internationally known firm Russell Reynolds.

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