BECOMING

Anti Fragile

LEARNING TO THRIVE
THROUGH DISRUPTION, CHALLENGE AND CHANGE

DR PAIGE WILLIAMS

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Praise for Becoming AntiFragile

Dr Paige Williams combines intellect with insight to help us understand how to move beyond resilience to become antifragile. She gives us the science and guides us through the practices that help us both professionally and personally. This is a must read for leaders navigating complex change.

Professor Lea Waters, PhD
Organisational psychologist, researcher and author
of *The Strength Switch*.

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Never more have we needed the ability to embody the qualities of AntiFragile. Paige's work is a critical tool for leaders in all industries looking to build strength, longevity and a new level of adaptability in their teams. It also holds an important place at a personal level, where we all need new perspectives on how to navigate in uncertain times and reimagine a new world of work and life.

Skye Tipler
Director, Mkt. Communications

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If our life is defined by the choices we make this might be one of the most important we choose to make: to see adversity and suffering as a place for growth and opportunity. This book explores that choice brilliantly!

Matt Church
Leadership Expert, Founder, Thought Leaders

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At a time when businesses – large and small – are under more pressure than ever, *Becoming AntiFragile* offers leaders practical principles to help us navigate the challenges and get better from it. I found Paige's work easy to read and translate into my own leadership practice, and I've used it with my team and seen the difference it's made to their energy, attitude and mindset. This is a must read for leaders who know that there must be something beyond resilience; there is – AntiFragile – and this book explains how to get there.

Bridget Blake
Director of Partner Engagement & Development, Specsavers ANZ

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With foundations in neuroscience and psychology, *Becoming AntiFragile* presents leaders with the possibility to move beyond resilience and develop the energy, attitudes and mindsets needed to meet the challenges and opportunities we are facing. The ROBUST principles provide a framework for leadership practice that can be applied across a broad range of contexts and used for personal and professional development and with teams. We are living in uncertain times; *Becoming AntiFragile* is the must-have leader's guide on how to not just 'get through' them, but to come out of it better than before.

Dr Sarah Leach
General Manager, Health, People and Community, GMHBA.
Adjunct Associate Professor, Faculty of Health, Deakin University

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We already knew we were in the decade of disruption and then came the coronavirus pandemic. This may well be the system release that is needed, but how?

Dr Paige Williams has that extremely rare ability, to take big and complex ideas, like "antifragility" and not only understand them, but help you to use them in your personal and professional lives, at a time in history when we so need this. But Paige goes further, not only how to use the idea as a tool, but how to become antifragile – inspiring you to your own preparedness and potentiality. The ROBUST principles she proposes are relevant to multiple contexts in your life, at home, at work, in the best of times and the worst of times.

Professor Lindsay Oades
Director, Centre for Positive Psychology, The University of Melbourne.
Wellbeing Public Policy Strategist

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Becoming AntiFragile brings theory, research and popular culture together into an enjoyable and digestible read. Like having Paige as an executive and life coach in your ear, it's very authentic, super relevant and a real lifeline for leaders in times like this.

Jennifer Drysdale
Head of Philanthropy, Sydney Symphony Orchestra

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Deeply researched and incredibly practical, this book is an invitation for us to lead ourselves and others through disruption and uncertainty.

Dr Michelle McQuaid
Founder and Director, The Michelle McQuaid Collective

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We are living in times of incredible disruption. Life as we've known it has rapidly changed. How do we manage not only our own wellbeing and productivity, but lead others through these times? The events of 2020 have revealed how fragile we have become, individually and collectively. Numerous resources point to ways to cope with, be resilient to, and manage these times of disruption. We are keeping our heads above water – barely. Could there be something more?

Becoming AntiFragile offers thought-provoking, action-oriented insights of strategies for not only surviving struggle, but embracing and thriving through struggle. The book incorporates a strong empirical basis in an easy-to-read, accessible, and digestible format. The material is contextually relevant to the 21st-century workplace and the challenges and opportunities that leaders at all levels within an organisation face in their everyday lives, with examples that are relatable and inspiring.

Our workplaces are VUCA in nature, and *Becoming AntiFragile* provides a refreshing, hopeful, and accessible approach for navigating the waters that we tread.

Associate Professor Peggy Kern, PhD
Centre for Positive Psychology, The University of Melbourne

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This book is gold! If you are facing any change, uncertainty or challenge right now (and let's face it, who isn't?) then this is the book for you. It is not a book about just surviving challenging times or bouncing back. It's an insightful book which is packed full of proven and practical strategies that show us all how we can emerge from any disruption stronger, wiser and better equipped to lean into the next challenge. Read it, highlight it, revisit it, quote from it and get a copy of it into the hands of every leader you care about.

Linda Hutchings
Head of Faculty, Thought Leaders Business School

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Becoming AntiFragile was thought provoking to say the least. It not only exposes some unhelpful thoughts and constructs but delivers a road map to where you would rather be. I found it inspiring, motivating and empowering.

Paige has a deep connection to her work and clearly believes that we all have the potential to thrive and to live a good life. She promotes wellness success and a win-win approach that is refreshing and speaks to a kinder, more productive world that we can all enjoy.

This book is for anyone who wants to take full responsibility for not only their life now but their legacy. The new leader will need every useful tip in this book to perform in the most disruptive decade we have ever had. Change is the only constant and *Becoming AntiFragile* allows us to adjust our mindset so we can enjoy the journey while moving clearly towards the destination of our own choices.

Garry Thompson
CEO, Uplifting Australia

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About the Author

I am passionate about leveraging leadership capacity.

A combination of real-life leadership experience and deep academic knowledge fuels my 'superpower' of translating complex ideas and academic research to make them real, relevant, and relatable to the work that leaders do every day.

Through my conference speaking and leadership development programs I replace fear with confidence and confusion with clarity. I motivate leaders to create positive, purposeful impact for themselves and for the people they lead. I have worked with hundreds of leaders in business, government, NGOs, and education, including Specsavers, Swisse, the Magistrates Court of Victoria, the Transport Accident Commission, and the University of Melbourne.

My commercial experience is broad and deep, and my knowledge of leadership more than theoretical. Having spent more than 20 years in

international leadership roles, I know what it's like to be a leader, and I have led and seen others lead both well and not so well in a wide range of contexts. This experience, supported by an undergraduate degree in business and postgraduate studies in organisational change, led to my doctoral research examining how to create positive change and wellbeing in organisations. I continue to research and teach as an Honorary Fellow of the Centre for Positive Psychology and an Associate of Melbourne Business School at The University of Melbourne.

I love to share my work. I have presented at conferences internationally and published in a range of academic and non-academic journals, including *Psychology Today* and *Human Resource Management*. I've also been interviewed for radio and a variety of podcasts, and I write a regular blog called *Leverage Points* (www.drpaigewilliams/leveragepoints).

As a firm believer in 'healthy body, healthy mind', I am a committed F45er and enjoy a regular yoga practice. I live on the Surf Coast of Victoria, Australia with my two adolescent daughters, who help me to keep showing up as my 'best self' every day.

I truly believe that leadership is the most potent leverage point we have to create positive change in any system, be it a family, a school, an organisation, or any team.

And I believe that each of us has a capacity for leadership that we have yet to realise. My hope is that this book helps you to realise more of yours.

With warmest wishes,

Acknowledgements

Writing does not come easily to me, and at times this book has felt like giving birth to a baby elephant! Fortunately, a number of people have helped with the 'delivery'.

To my daughters Olivia and Isabella, you are my inspiration and my motivation. Thank you for listening to my rants and dealing with my frustration as I wrestled the words out of my head and onto the pages. Thank you also for being my 'crash test dummies' and listening to me read sections aloud to make sure it made sense.

Thanks to my team – Niki Flood, my business manager; Cath Connell, my website and branding guru; and Claire Kidd, my communications expert – for keeping me on track with everything else in the world as I disappeared down the rabbit hole that was this book. Thanks to my book coach, Kelly Irving, for your advice on writing and particularly the book structure. Finally, thank you to the team at Hambone Publishing for your editing, production, and publishing expertise.

I also want to extend my thanks to a variety of people who may not even realise how much they helped me on this journey. In particular, I give my thanks to Michelle McQuaid, my friend, fellow geek, and wellbeing expert, for your support, coaching, mentoring, guidance,

ideas, enthusiasm... the list goes on. And to the MMcQHQ team for their unconditional support throughout the process. To my Thought Leaders mentors Linda Hutchings and Matt Church, my friend Cynthia Mahoney, and the whole TL Tribe who make it feel like 'business as usual' to write a book a year.

Bernard de Chartres is believed to have said that we discover truths by building on previous discoveries – by 'standing on the shoulders of giants'. This book is written on the shoulders of many giants. In particular, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, who conceived the concept of antifragile. The world needs people like Taleb – people who challenge our paradigms and question our collective ethics. Looking in the mirror is not always pretty or comfortable, but it is very necessary. Taleb's body of work *Incerto*, of which *Antifragile* is part, forces us to do this and to be accountable for what we see.

Finally, I would like to thank my mum, who, as always, has been there as an unwavering source of love, support, and generosity, and is a living example of Becoming AntiFragile. Thank you Mum. I love you.

Preface

The idea for this book was conceived in September 2019. As I started writing in January 2020 – at the beginning of what I had already begun to call the Decade of Disruption – I could not have foreseen the events that would unfold in the coming months.

The global COVID-19 pandemic changed patterns of working and living across the globe in just a few short weeks. With a level of disruption not experienced at this scale since the world wars or the Great Depression, it will undoubtedly leave an indelible mark on world history.

This book was not written in response to COVID-19. The ideas within were conceived and collated well before the pandemic took hold. Nevertheless, it is a timely context that lays bare the fragility of our modern world and the processes, structures, and dynamics that create it. The case for Becoming AntiFragile was present before COVID-19. But in the wake of COVID-19 it is more compelling than ever.

At a time when disruption, uncertainty, and challenge are amplified to extraordinary levels, I believe that understanding how to Become AntiFragile will help us answer the question 'How can we be better

from this experience?' with honesty and humility. And I believe that by Becoming AntiFragile, we can take effective action that makes a difference in our own lives and in the world at large.

Introduction

As our expectations drift further and further from our reality, we have become less able to cope than ever before.

We feel fragile.

When something is fragile, it breaks easily – a window pane, a crystal glass, your mother's antique vase. These things require careful handling because they don't perform well under stress and pressure. When we are dealing with something fragile, we handle it carefully and make exceptions to accommodate its delicate nature.

The same is true of people. When we are feeling fragile, our world becomes smaller. We feel less able to deal with the challenges and engage with the opportunities of life. We're just getting through.

So what *is* the opposite of fragile?

Words like *strong*, *robust*, *sturdy*, and *resilient* come to mind. And yet these don't capture the true opposite of fragile. If fragile is broken, overwhelmed, crushed, or defeated by adverse conditions, then the opposite would grow, develop, and improve in that same type of environment.

The opposite of fragile thrives through disruption, challenge, and change.

The opposite of fragile is AntiFragile.

The word *antifragile* was coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his 2011 book *Antifragile: Things That Gain Through Disorder*. Taleb uses it in the context of socioeconomic and political systems and their ability to withstand disruption and unpredictable events.

When something is fragile, shock or disorder hurts and perhaps even breaks it. When it is robust and resilient, it can withstand shocks and disorder and even bounce back from them. But what if we take it one step further? When something is truly AntiFragile, it *improves* through uncertainty, shock, and disorder; it *improves* through the experiences of uncertainty, challenge, and change that come with disruption.

*When **we** are AntiFragile **we** improve through stress, pressure, and adversity.*

I've often wondered, how is it that some people, teams, and organisations are able to 'read the landscape' – almost as if they have a crystal ball – and elegantly adjust by reinventing themselves, innovating new ideas, and meeting new market needs? When life happens and things tip on their head – a merger, a restructure, a new CEO, a new project – how is it that some leaders are able to navigate the struggle and challenge, whilst others just spin their wheels, devolving into pointless circles or collapsing under the pressure?

Like you, in my professional and personal life I've experienced ups and downs, challenges and opportunities, joy and sadness. Some of these I handled better than others, some I survived more intact than others, and some helped me learn and grow in ways that enabled me to thrive.

Why?

I first came across the word *antifragile* in Mark Manson's *Everything is F*cked: A Book About Hope*. Working from the basis that pain is a universal constant, Manson suggests that everything we do, are, and care about reflects our choice to be fragile or AntiFragile. This captured my attention. What would it mean for a person to 'Become AntiFragile'? How could we develop AntiFragile human systems?

With these questions burning in my head, I read Taleb's original work. In it, Taleb challenges our current operating model of capitalism, questions our slavish admiration of academia and 'empty experts', and supports the value of the collective over individualism. At the same time, he warns of the 'bigger is better' mentality that dominates our current political and economic systems and exposes the fragility inherent in the complexity and hyper-connectedness of centralised government and massive global corporations.

But it was the principles that underpinned Taleb's work that interested me. What could AntiFragile look like for individuals? How could these principles help leaders become antifragile, and even go beyond that to support AntiFragile teams, cultures, organisations...?

AntiFragile leaders

Through my 20+ years of experience as a business leader, my doctoral research, and my professional work with hundreds of leaders across business, government, NGOs, and education, I see that leaders need help to:

- move beyond just 'getting through'
- experience gain rather than loss from disruption, challenge, and change
- understand how we are making ourselves fragile and what will help us Become AntiFragile.

The ideas and possibilities exploded! The idea of AntiFragility appealed to me as much in the context of my own lived experience as from a theoretical and academic perspective. It provided a different view on many of the challenges I had faced as a leader and drew together the fields of academic work I had been playing in for over 10 years. Here was something I had experienced in both my personal and my professional life, over and over again. Here was something I could help people understand, learn, and live, and in doing so provide immense value – for them, and also for me. For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of my work as a calling.

This was a book I felt compelled to write.

About this book...

I like to have things to look forward to and to know where I'm going, so let me start with a primer on what's ahead for you.

In Part I we examine the case for Becoming AntiFragile by exploring what makes us fragile, and the implications this has for us as leaders. We answer the question *Why do I need to go on this journey?*

In Part II we get to know the AntiFragile landscape better by exploring what it is and isn't, before unfolding our map for the Becoming AntiFragile journey.

Once we've scoped the landscape and understood the map, our journey will progress in four stages. In Part II, we focus on the first two stages: locating your position, and becoming familiar with a 'Travel Guide' of principles to guide your journey.

1. Locate your position.

Before you can embark on a journey, you need to know your starting point. You can work out your precise position on the map by taking the AntiFragile survey and getting a personalised report at www. theantifragilesurvey.com. If you're not one for surveys, that's fine! You'll be invited to get a gauge on your location by considering a few simple questions along the way.

2. Get the Travel Guide.

In Chapter 4 we apply Taleb's principles for AntiFragile sociopolitical and economic systems to a system of one: you. Like a Lonely Planet Guide for Becoming AntiFragile, the ROBUST principles will help you navigate your journey without simply telling you where to go. These principles are designed to be easily applied to your everyday life and work as a leader.

In Part III, we get into the nitty gritty of the actual route you'll take to Become AntiFragile.

3. Plan your route.

Becoming AntiFragile is a unique journey for each of us, and that means we each need a personalised route plan. In Part III we look at what it means to have AntiFragile Energy, AntiFragile Attitudes, and AntiFragile Mindsets. We explore how applying the ROBUST principles to these three things can help you reduce fragility, build robustness, and make a difference in your life and leadering. By the end of this section, you'll understand what the first steps of your Becoming AntiFragile journey could look like.

4. Take your first steps... and keep going!

Map? Check.
Travel Guide? Check.
Personalised route plan? Check.
Time to get going!

Sounds easy, right? But sometimes it *isn't* that easy, and even once you get started, it can be really hard to keep going. So in Part IV we'll look at what it means to move from *Becoming* to *Being* AntiFragile and how, by using the latest research on behaviour change, you can create helpful habits that keep you moving rather than anchoring you in place.

Along the way you'll meet Alex – an up-and-coming leader facing many of the challenges that I've seen and experienced – and join Alex's journey to Becoming AntiFragile. You'll also meet other people in Alex's life and see how they experience fragility and AntiFragility and what impact that has.

Summaries at the end of each chapter make it easy to review or preview content. Parts II and III also feature easy-to-use summaries of all the actions suggested throughout the chapters as a practical checklist.

One more note: you'll notice I use the word *leadering* rather than *leadership* throughout the book – a verb, rather than a noun. This is not a grammatical error. Rather, it is a way to communicate my belief that leadering is *active*, and intentional. It is something we do every day, and it is available to everyone. As distinct from the action of leading, leadering is about *being* a leader – of yourself and of others. It's about how we show up in the world and the impact that has. It's the 'little-l' leadership you show every day.

Leadering happens. Everyone does it. We get to choose *how*. By the end of this book, you will understand why AntiFragile Leadering always wins out, and you will be ready to apply it in your own life.

My invitation to you

Courage and comfort are a bit like Apple and Microsoft – rarely seen together! But having the courage to sit with, engage, and lean into the discomfort that comes with uncertainty and disruption is the essence of Becoming AntiFragile.

To take on board the ideas I share with you here – to really absorb them into your identity – may mean making deep changes to your beliefs, to the stories you tell yourself about who you are and how you lead. It will mean taking a real, honest look in the mirror at how you show up, what is serving you, and how you may be helping or hindering yourself and those around you. And it will ask you to take a bigger, braver view on the impact you could have in your world and the world at large if you embrace the courage to show up, to take risks and learn from them, and to choose to intentionally lead *your* life, *your* way.

> Take the path of courage as you read this book. Take a bigger, braver view on the impact you could have in your world and the world at large.

I invite you to take the path of courage as you read this book. To let go of your current ways of thinking and behaving when they do not serve you; to embrace the opportunity to lean into challenge rather than avoid it; to embrace uncertainty and to learn to thrive through disruption and change. I invite you to achieve things through your leadering, for yourself and for others, that you had never imagined possible. In Becoming AntiFragile, I hope that you become more of who you truly are and experience more of what you truly want.

Let's begin.

Part I

The Case for AntiFragile

'Really, Paige? Do I need to Become AntiFragile? I've got a lot going on right now...'

I hear you!

If you're going to invest your time and effort, you need to know that Becoming AntiFragile will actually bring results. So in this section we'll examine the case for Becoming AntiFragile through two timeframes – what's going on right now, and what we've got to look forward to.

As we begin a new decade, our environment is becoming more complex, more uncertain, and more affected by 'wicked problems' than ever before.

Climate change, scarcity of resources, and the rise of nationalism in global political and economic dynamics are having widespread impacts on the way we live and relate to each other. At the same time, the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution has brought a new complexity to the workplace, with the opportunities of artificial intelligence and an increasingly diverse workforce who often work remotely. And in our personal lives, we are experiencing and responding to changing family structures, more working parents, an ageing population, and technology that allows us to be constantly connected – often in all the wrong ways. In this context, resilience is no longer enough. Welcome to the Decade of Disruption.

Resilience is no longer enough in the Decade of Disruption.

Add to this the impact of COVID-19 and now more than ever, we need to understand how to thrive through this disruption, challenge, and change. We need to let go of old ways of being, doing, and leading based on the belief that we can control and predict what's coming. We need to accept the inevitability of change, stop fighting it, and use it to leverage opportunity, growth, and development by asking, *How can we be better coming out of this than we were coming in?*

The thinking that got us here isn't going to see us through what lies ahead. We need to embrace the unknown, the uncertain, the unexpected, the unplanned, and the unwanted that life throws at us. We need to start Becoming AntiFragile.

CHAPTER 1

Right Here, Right Now

In November 2019, a 55-year-old man from Hubei province in China contracted a pneumonia virus of unknown origin. By the end of June 2020, over 10 million people in more than 200 countries and territories around the world had contracted what was now known as COVID-19. Over 510,000 people had died, and experts estimated that it would be 12–18 months before a vaccine was available to the public.

Almost overnight, non-essential businesses around the globe shut down; office workers were sent to work from home; schools closed. Many countries imposed quarantines or entry bans for citizens and visitors, and some set up border controls. International and domestic travel was severely restricted.

People were told to stay indoors and to leave their homes only for essentials – work, food, medical attention, and one period of exercise per day. In Australia, people were asked to keep a physical distance of 1.5 metres from others whenever they were outside the home in order to help prevent the virus from spreading, and supermarkets and stores put markers on the ground to reinforce this measure. Worldwide, 2.6 billion people – around a third of the global population and more than were alive in World War II – were under some form of lockdown.

People panicked. Supermarkets ran out of stock; shelves emptied; people fought over toilet paper. Purchase quantities were restricted for in-demand items. Hand sanitiser and face masks became as coveted as diamonds.

As for the economic impact, it was nothing short of devastating. In the week ending 28 February 2020, stock markets worldwide saw their largest single-week declines since the 2008 global financial crisis. Global stock markets crashed even further in March 2020, with falls of several percent in the world's major indices.

As the pandemic continued to spread, global conferences and events across industries as diverse as technology, fashion, and sports were cancelled or postponed. Production of film and television programs was shut down or delayed, Disney closed its parks across the globe, and Pope Francis livestreamed the Holy Week liturgies from St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. There was not a single industry sector that wasn't impacted in some way as governments were forced to prepare and implement massive bailout packages.

It was history in the making.

Whilst the impact on the global economy is yet to be fully realised, at the time of writing, it is estimated to be in the trillions and anticipated to change the face of world politics forever. International Monetary Fund (IMF) managing director Kristalina Georgieva declared that the global economy will contract in 2020, and that this 'recession [is] at least as bad as during the global financial crisis or worse.' By June 2020 the IMF was deploying its entire lending capacity of 1 trillion USD to meet requests for support from over 100 member countries. This was a 'black swan' of epic proportions, and it showed just how fragile we had become.

Danger! Black swans ahead.

The term 'black swan' is used in economics to describe a high-profile, hard-to-predict, and rare event that is beyond the realm of normal expectations in history, science, finance, and technology based on past experience. 'Black swan theory' was developed by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his book *Black Swans: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Taleb suggests that black swans have three attributes: 'First, it is an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme "impact". Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable.' So significant are the repercussions of black swan events that a small number explain almost everything in our world, from the success of ideas and religions, to the dynamics of historical events, to the trajectories of our own personal lives.

Black swan events are rare, have extreme impact, and are 'predictable' only in retrospect.

Whilst the debate about whether COVID-19 was a 'true' black swan continues, the learning we can take from black swan theory is that we need to be prepared for what we cannot predict. We cannot predict every disruption in our lives, nor the uncertainty, challenge, or change they may bring. But whether it is a promotion or a redundancy, a new job or a new boss, the start of a new relationship or the end of a current one, we can 'be better' from our experiences. And Becoming AntiFragile helps us to do just that.

We make ourselves fragile.

Unfortunately, many of the habits, systems, processes, and mindsets that characterise our modern society contribute to making us fragile. We are so obsessed with being 'right', being 'successful', and being

'perfect' that we try to remove any and all stressors from our lives. The problem is, without challenges and volatility, we become weaker. And when the inevitable failures, falls, and obstacles do happen, we don't have the skills or resources to cope.

The hyper-connectivity provided by social media is leading many of us to rest too much of our self-identity, self-concept, and self-belief in the hands of others. All too often the way we feel about ourselves comes down to how many 'likes' or comments our latest story received. Just as hyper-connectivity can make an economic system fragile to disruption (just look at the impact of COVID-19), social hyper-connectivity can do the same thing to individuals.

As leaders, there are certain practices that make us and our teams more fragile. In particular, we make ourselves and our teams more fragile when we fail to recognise our biases and 'default' thinking patterns. When we continually listen to the same voices with similar perspectives to our own (the 'echo chamber') rather than seeking diversity and supporting healthy conflict. When we fall into the trap of expecting that systems and processes will 'take care of things' instead of doing the real work that needs to be done. When we put off the uncomfortable conversation with *that* team member until the next performance review cycle instead of addressing the issues now, while they are current and relevant. Any time we avoid the stress and challenge of discomfort, we make ourselves – and our teams – weaker and more fragile.

> *We make ourselves weaker when we overprotect and avoid stress and challenge.*

Another common problem is that we tend to underestimate random-ness. Think about the people in your team or your family – the vari-ety of ages, backgrounds, knowledge and skill levels, and personality types. It's a firework of randomness just waiting to ignite! So why do

we downplay its impact? Our minds can play tricks on us through our cognitive biases and selective memory, turning history into a smooth, linear timeline that simply doesn't reflect reality. As a result, we have a tendency to focus on 'typical' situations rather than understanding and accounting for the fact that we exist within complex systems, with interdependencies that can be hard to detect and responses that are hard to predict. Then when something unexpected does happen, we overreact and can't cope.

Have you ever learned something valuable from getting it wrong? When you look back at your most important lessons in life, have some (perhaps most?) come from times when you were challenged? When you were really pushed to your limits? Yup, me too.

There's little doubt – and lots of evidence – that we learn more from our mistakes and failures than from our successes. Personal disruption leads to growth. And that's because complex systems – like human beings – need challenge and stress to thrive.

Research by The Wellbeing Lab found that thriving and struggle often go hand in hand. The results suggest that Australian workers who self-reported as 'living well despite struggles' performed just as well as those who felt they were 'consistently thriving'. They also had similar (and higher) levels of job satisfaction and commitment to their organisation than workers who were 'just getting by' or 'really struggling'. This is backed up by research by Dr Adam Fraser with 800 professionals working in highly complex and changing environments. Fraser found that if we see struggle as a threat, because we fear we might make a mistake, fail, or be exposed as incompetent, we focus on trying to avoid struggle or blame others. In contrast, when we see struggle as a challenge and focus on the growth opportunities it offers, we are more likely to strive, evolve, and be innovative. Fraser suggests that striving through struggle enables us to tolerate being uncomfortable whilst focusing on the growth that will come from our experiences.

The truth is, when we avoid small mistakes, it makes the impact and fallout of the big ones more severe. By introducing smaller doses of stress, disruption, and challenge, we make the system (that's you!) as a whole stronger and more able to deal with larger doses, to the extent that it actually develops and improves through the experience.

In the volatile, uncertain context of the Decade of Disruption, it is better to create an AntiFragile system that learns and grows through trial and error than to play it safe and try to be right all the time. Why? Because prediction in the Decade of Disruption is impossible. Unexpected events are inevitable, and we can only respond effectively – and perhaps come out stronger for it – if we are AntiFragile. In fact, this is the very essence of Becoming AntiFragile: being prepared for what we can't predict. And this means lassoing the black swan around the neck, hanging on tight, and maybe even enjoying the ride!

The essence of Becoming AntiFragile is being prepared for what we can't predict.

Summary

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how fragile we have become.

- We rely too much on external factors, avoid discomfort, and underestimate randomness.

- The habits, systems, and processes of our modern world contribute to our fragility; we demonise failure and are in constant pursuit of perfection.

- Research shows that when we see struggle as a challenge and focus on what we can learn from it, we are better equipped to thrive.

- Smaller doses of stress, disruption, and challenge make the bigger issues more manageable so that we can evolve through them.

- In the complex, interconnected world we now live in, we need to be prepared for what we can't predict. We need to Become AntiFragile.

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Meet Alex

It was Monday morning and Alex had just made it to work – later than planned, again. Even now, juggling a takeaway coffee (aka breakfast) in one hand and a weekend's worth of files in the other, the office was a welcome retreat from the chaos of the 'morning routine'.

With three children under 15 and a partner with a small business, to say that Alex's mornings were busy would be an understatement. Packed lunches, excursion forms, after-school-activity transport negotiations, the usual breakfast and missing school uniform issues (the washing machine must eat socks!)... the list went on! This morning the added call from Mum about Dad's chest infection had meant it was a miracle only 20 minutes had been lost from the start of the day. Unfortunately, that had eaten up most of Alex's prep time for the morning's team meeting.

With 10 minutes to go until the meeting, Alex hastily jotted down some agenda items whilst thinking of the recent conversation with the Operations Director, Glenn. The project was behind schedule, the budget had been blown, and the overseas client wasn't happy – in fact, they'd started to raise questions about the team's capacity to deliver.

The truth was, there were a few team members who tended to sit back without offering ideas, didn't help to move things forward, and always seemed to come up with reasons why not rather than ask, 'How could we...?' It was draining trying to motivate and energise them, especially when they were spread

across different states, countries, and time zones. To make matters even worse, the project brief and scope kept moving as the client reacted to changes in their customer market.

Alex couldn't help but wonder: *Does it have to be like this? What am I doing wrong? Is there another way?*

Snapping back to reality, Alex focused again on the scribbled agenda. Pushing down rising feelings of overwhelm at the looming project deadlines, Alex walked into the meeting, thinking, *Let's just get through this...*

What do you see?

- In what ways is Alex struggling?
- What is making Alex fragile?
- Do you recognise any of these factors in your own life?

CHAPTER 2

Mind the Gaps

The consequences of advancement and progress in the physical world – information overload, isolation, and breakdown of social systems – have outstripped our psychological developmental capacity. And the gap between what philosopher Ken Wilber calls our 'internal and external worlds' is getting bigger. Whilst biologically and physiologically we may be adapting and evolving to the needs and demands of our context, psychologically we are not keeping up. We simply cannot cope with the world we have created.

> *We cannot cope with the complex world we have created.*

For many of us, the world is becoming more uncertain and open to disruption. The level, pace, and complexity of change is increasing, and technology is advancing in ways most of us can only imagine. Scarcity of resources, increasing nationalism, and a growing divide between rich and poor have created volatile environments throughout history, and this volatility is only increasing with the impact of COVID-19.

The term VUCA – volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous – was once reserved for military contexts, but now applies to our everyday

personal and professional lives. It is perhaps the only constant as technology opens up the world to us and we experience more of it. Has the world itself become more VUCA? Maybe, maybe not, but we are certainly more exposed to information that makes it *feel* like it is. Where once we were drinking from a water fountain, we're now trying to drink from a fire hydrant. And our brains are drowning.

> *Our brains are drowning in the quantity and nature of information we are exposed to.*

In this context it is hardly surprising to see an epidemic of anxiety and stress sweeping across all layers and levels of the population. Depression is currently the most common mental health issue on the planet, with nearly 300 million people affected around the world. The World Health Organization expects that by 2030 depression will have become the largest single healthcare burden, costing $6 trillion per year globally.

Research by mental health support service Beyond Blue suggests that one-quarter of Australians will experience an anxiety condition in their lifetime, that one in six has experienced anxiety or depression in the last 12 months, and that one in seven is *currently* experiencing an anxiety condition. Suicide is the leading cause of death among young Australians. About 350 young people aged 15–24 take their own lives every year – more than die in road accidents. For every youth suicide, there are up to 200 more attempts. People of all ages, races, genders, incomes, and family backgrounds commit suicide, but young people are especially at risk.

I see three main 'gaps' that expose our fragility and will only get bigger in the future. They are:

- Safety versus risk
- Expectations versus reality
- Stability versus disruption

STATUS QUO

Safety → Risk

Expectations → Reality

Stability → Disruption

ANTIFRAGILE FUTURE
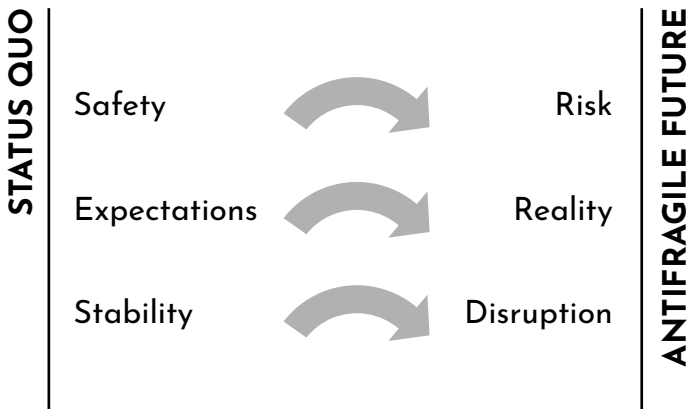
The fragility gaps

Gap 1: Safety versus risk

When it comes to our ancestral gene pool, it was 'survival of the safest' rather than 'survival of the fittest' that won the day. When we were living on the plains of Africa, was it the gene of courage, prompting us to stay and fight the tiger, that supported survival? Nope! No heroes required here, thanks. It was the gene that helped us to sense danger and compelled us to run first or fastest that guaranteed we got to hunt for another dinner rather than become one. So the gene pool from which we are derived comes from the 'safest of the safe' brains, because that's what kept us alive and helped the tribe survive.

But when it comes to disrupted, uncertain, volatile environments, playing it safe just isn't the best option. Playing it safe assumes that we can control our context, that we can predict or model what the possible outcomes could be, that planned strategic action will see us through. But in the complex, uncertain world we've created, that isn't enough. We need to take intelligent risks in order to meet the challenges and benefit from the opportunities that the Decade of Disruption will inevitably provide.

Gap 2: Expectations versus reality

Much of the fragility we create and the pain we suffer comes from the gap between our expectations – what we believe the world 'should' look like – and what we actually experience day to day. We see this in all areas of life.

What are our expectations of leaders?

As I work with my clients, a common theme I hear is that they are expected to do more with less. Shorter deadlines mean less time, streamlined teams mean fewer people, and budget constraints mean fewer resources. It can feel like a no-win situation, and that leaves leaders feeling helpless and hopeless. What 'should' leaders do?

What are our expectations of business?

As the debate around our role in the health of the planet intensifies, traditional models of business and economics based on Milton Friedman's 'shareholder theory', which holds that a business' primary responsibility is to its shareholders, are being challenged. Models that recognise the role of business in advancing meaningful progress and contributing to the greater good of the world are gaining support, particularly from millennials. What 'should' the role of business be?

What are our expectations of life?

'Life satisfaction' measures how people evaluate their life as a whole, as distinct from what they may be feeling right now. It is what's called a 'global evaluation', as opposed to a specific one. We can experience satisfaction in different areas of life, including work, relationships, family and friends, personal development, and health and fitness. A person feels 'life satisfaction' when they judge that their real life reflects or fulfils their ideal life plan. And this is the issue.

Our expectations of what an 'ideal life plan' looks like have become unrealistic. The expectations we have of ourselves, our achievements, our relationships with loved ones, the fulfilment we get from work, our physical health and appearance, and our love life create a constant sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction when they are not met. We see other people's 'perfect' personal lives on social media and their 'perfect' professional lives on LinkedIn and we assume we are falling behind. In reality we are only seeing what others want to us to see and not the complete picture. On a cognitive level most of us realise this, but we still can't help but compare ourselves to these unrealistic, 'untrue' standards and then berate ourselves when we don't come close. We have created our own echo chamber, and we don't like how it sounds. What 'should' our lives comprise?

Gap 3: Stability versus disruption

In a VUCA world, traditional approaches to leadership, strategy, and change just don't work. The dominant leadership narrative in most workplaces assumes a system that is mostly stable and that simply requires data, analysis, leadership visions, and plans to solve problems and to realise opportunities that arise. Unfortunately, because we can't model the future based solely on the past, these leadership visions often turn out to be wrong – and even when they are right, we don't realise quickly enough because the feedback lag time is too long. In a rapidly changing and diverse world, traditional approaches to leadership are not only ineffective, they actually create barriers to success.

On a global scale, prevailing economic dynamics have changed little since the end of World War II in 1945. For example, although the United States has established itself as a world state, its overly complex and densely connected resources and power structures, levels of bureaucracy, and layers of administration have stifled innovation. As a result, systems have failed to adapt to the changes around them.

When systems remain stable rather than responsive to changes in their context like this, they become stagnant and fragile. We can see the effects of this systemic inflexibility at many levels. Here are just a few that are being lived out in many nations – including Australia – across the world:

- Mental health issues rise as people are unable to access the support they need to close the gap between their internal and external worlds.

- Consumer debt levels are higher than at any point in history as we try to buy our way out of the gap between expectations and reality.

- New business creation is stagnant as we demonise failure, quash innovation, and create financial systems that disadvantage start-ups.

- Wealth disparity has grown to epic proportions. In 2020, the 20 richest people in the world are worth the same as the bottom 50% (that's 3.75 billion people).

- Political polarisation continues to spread across the globe as leaders with narrow agendas and short-term perspectives gain power.

- Shared cultural values within and across nations are increasingly fragmented as we become focused on 'saving ourselves'.

What these systems need is 'system release' – a phase of reorganisation that clears the way for innovation and increases the system's capacity to deal with future shocks and change. Only then can a system Become AntiFragile.

> *We need a 'system release' that clears the way for innovation and increases capacity to deal with future shocks and change.*

As we entered the Decade of Disruption, and even before the impact of COVID-19, this system release was already long overdue. In a context of rapidly advancing technology and increasing globalisation, our fragile systems had created an environment in which disruption was inevitable. And as we scramble to catch up with the scale and pace of change that results from our 'advancement', VUCA is the new normal.

How can we close the gaps?

We simply cannot prevent, predict, or control the disruption, challenge, and change inherent in the VUCA environment we have created. Although research suggests we are born with an inherent level of resilience, we are making ourselves fragile through the world we have created and the expectations we hold. As the gap between our expectations and the current reality gets bigger, many of us are falling into the danger zone for anxiety and depression. On a day-to-day basis, for most of us, robustness is no longer a part of who we are.

Like a lizard losing its tail, we need a mechanism by which the system – us – regenerates itself continuously by *using* rather than *suffering* from unpredictable events, shocks, stressors, and volatility. This is what Becoming AntiFragile is all about.

It allows us to deal with the unknown, to do things without necessarily understanding them, and to do them well. It prepares us to face what we can't predict, and to lean into disruption, challenge, and change. It is how we learn to thrive in the Decade of Disruption.

In Becoming AntiFragile we use rather than suffer from unpredictable events, stressors, and uncertainty, and in doing so, we prepare ourselves to face what we can't predict.

Summary

- The volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment we now live in has resulted in increased stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.

- Our fragility is centred around three main gaps:
  1. Safety vs risk – our ancestral 'survival of the safest' instinct no longer serves us.
  2. Expectation vs reality – we don't live the lives we feel we 'should' be living.
  3. Stability vs disruption – our embedded systems leave no opportunity for innovation and growth.

- To Become AntiFragile, systems – including us – need a 'release' that allows them to reorganise and to clear the way for innovation and increase capacity to deal with future shocks and change.

- To do this we need a mechanism by which the system regenerates itself continuously by *using* rather than *suffering* from unpredictable events.

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A rising star

Alex's boss Glenn gaped at the number of unread emails in her inbox. *Really?* she thought to herself. *How can that many have come in over the last 24 hours? I spent an hour clearing them on Saturday evening – making me late for dinner. Not sure the effort was worth the trouble I got in for it!*

Glenn noticed that several of the emails were from the same client – Alex's big project. Hmm, Alex... definitely a rising star, lots of potential, but also heading for burnout. Glenn thought back over their recent conversation. Alex wanted to please everyone – the client, the team, Glenn – and was always trying to provide all the answers. Doing more and fixing things was clearly the pattern of working that got Alex promoted, but it wasn't the right approach at this level. The project team was diverse in terms of personality, experience, and geographic locations; Glenn knew there were complexities. But Alex relied too much on the opinions of a few members of the team and wasn't prepared to challenge them, to take a risk.

Glenn could see that the team dynamics were stale – similar ways of thinking, not much creativity or innovation. What they needed, she thought, was for some new people to come in to help them think about the issues in new ways and from different perspectives. Glenn had brought this up in her meeting with Alex, suggesting a few 'guest attendees' at team meetings to mix things up over the next few weeks, but Alex seemed reluctant, saying something about not being sure 'how the team would take it'. That was another issue – Alex was too concerned about the team's personal opinions.

Sometimes people needed to experience and live through the 'pain' of challenge to get to where they needed to be, Glenn thought. She was meeting with Alex again today, so she'd check in again then. In the meantime, back to tackling the inbox.

What do you see?

- Based on Glenn's reflections above, what is Alex doing that increases fragility?

- Where are the 'fragility gaps' in the scenario above?

- Which of the three fragility gaps are impacting your own life and leadering?

Part II

What Can Get You There

Now that you understand the case for Becoming AntiFragile, in this section we'll explore the AntiFragile landscape more closely, unfold the map for your Becoming AntiFragile journey, and locate your position on the map (www.theantifragilesurvey.com). We'll also dive into the ROBUST principles that will act as our AntiFragile Travel Guide, helping us to navigate the landscape like a local.

AntiFragility underpins everything that changes over time. Just consider evolution, culture, ideas, innovation, even us as a species. These complex, organic, 'living' systems improve through disruption and change – they adapt to make the most of their new conditions. In contrast, static, inert systems are slow and inactive. They cannot or do not adapt, and so they collapse or break under the pressure of disruption and change. They are fragile.

Whether we are fragile or robust, resilient or AntiFragile reflects how we feel about the relative balance between the levels of disruption, challenge, and change in our environment, and our resources and capacity to respond to it. The larger the gap between what is being asked of us and what we have to give, the more fragile we are likely to feel. In Chapter 3 we unpack a more nuanced understanding of what AntiFragile is to better understand the landscape and open up the map that will guide us on our journey.

It is an appealing illusion that we can control life, ourselves, and others through fixed structures, detailed planning, and the promise of rewards or threat of reprimands. But it is just that: an illusion. Research by Margaret Wheatley suggests that when we try to exert control in this way, it does more harm than good and drains a system of its vitality. It simply doesn't work. This is because human systems are complex, with many unseen and unknown dynamics and connections. Any change can create unintended consequences that can be nearly impossible to predict.

The same is true of environments that are uncertain and prone to disruption. In these environments, prescriptive rules are inappropriate at best and harmful at worst. And this is counter to traditional thinking about managing change. In his 1988 model of change, Harvard Professor John Kotter proposes that successful change lies in creating a burning platform, forming powerful coalitions, creating a vision, and then communicating that vision frequently and consistently. He suggests that a planned approach that progresses through identifiable

stages of change is possible; that change happens at a constant and steady pace; and that at some point it stops so that we can draw breath and start our next 'campaign', ignite our next burning platform. But if any of that was ever true, it certainly isn't anymore.

In a volatile, complex environment, the impacts and consequences of decisions and actions are often unintended, unclear, or opaque; we just can't, don't, or won't see them. Rules are too narrow and prescriptive to work effectively in this kind of context. Instead, we need heuristics – practical guiding principles that help us solve problems and learn more about ourselves and others. Heuristic principles are not guaranteed to be optimal or perfect but are sufficient to reach an intermediate goal. They are rules of thumb that we know are imperfect, but that simplify things and make them easier to implement.

The six ROBUST principles outlined in Chapter 4 have been designed as guiding heuristics that can be applied across a range of contexts in your life, both personal and professional. They are flexible and expansive, not rigid or prescriptive. They meet the demands of a complex and changing environment and reveal a clear pathway forward.

How Can I Help?

It is my heartfelt hope that the ideas in this book provide you with the map, provisions for your pack, and principles you need to take with you on your journey to Becoming AntiFragile. But if you or others in your world would like some extra guidance on the journey, I'd be delighted to help you.

Keynote speaking

If you're looking to create not just an event but an experience that empowers people to embrace uncertainty, challenge, and change with confidence and clarity, look no further.

I've helped hundreds of people leverage their leadership to Become AntiFragile, creating positive, purposeful impact for them and the people they lead. Offering practical evidence-based strategies they can immediately apply, I leave people with the confidence and motivation to learn to thrive as they navigate uncertainty, challenge, and change.

Find out more here: www.drpaigewilliams.com/speaking

Corporate education

Want to make the most of your leadership potential and the capacity of your team?

Using a potent blend of positive psychology, neuroscience, systems thinking, my own research, and real-world leadership experience, my online and face-to-face development programs provide practical, evidence-based strategies to help people Become AntiFragile, elevate performance and create positive, purposeful impact.

Find out more here: www.drpaigewilliams.com/programs

Mentoring and executive coaching

I'm often asked by leaders if they can use me as a sounding board on how to deal with a specific leadership challenge. These leaders don't need a full coaching program, but could do with an injection of perspective, advice, or expertise to help their thinking. My mentoring sessions are the perfect answer.

Coaching is a powerful and effective way to leverage your leadership and level up your capacity and performance. I love working one on one with executives to craft an individualised development plan tailored to meet their personal hopes, ambitions, and learning needs.

Find out more here: www.drpaigewilliams.com/programs/#mentoring

Let's Stay in Touch...

I'd love to stay connected, and I appreciate and respect that time and attention are your most precious resources.

My regular blog, *Leverage Points*, offers the latest leadership ideas, research, and evidence translated into everyday actions that will encourage an AntiFragile, Tinkering mindset and motivate you to try new practices in your leadership.

Occasionally, when I've got something exciting and new to share, I'll send one of my resources as a learning gift and let you know about upcoming conference presentations.

You can sign up to stay in touch here: www.drpaigewilliams.com/connect

I hope to hear from you soon!

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