

The Right Mindset

Why courage is not enough, and the interior disciplines that sustain leadership over the long struggle

A training essay for members of the World Liberty Congress and the World Liberty Academy. Third principle of the WLC Adaptations to Counter-Autocracy Strategic Framework (Berlin, November 2025).

The principle, in one sentence. Movements win not only through courage but through empathy, humility, and learning. Understanding those who support the regime, and questioning our own assumptions, helps build broader coalitions, prevent polarization, and sustain legitimacy over the long struggle. Conviction provides direction; openness provides perspective. Both are essential for lasting leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The interior discipline of political action

Democratic theory has long privileged the external. Institutions, constitutions, electoral systems, coalition architectures, international pressure mechanisms. The emphasis is not arbitrary. Institutions are, as Douglass North observed, the stabilizing rules of the game that shape incentives and, by extension, collective outcomes.

But there is a dimension that institutional analysis consistently underweights, and that every serious practitioner of democratic transformation has identified as decisive: the interior condition of the people who operate within those institutions, and against those who corrupt them. Antonio Gramsci understood this when he distinguished between the war of maneuver, the direct contest for state power, and the more demanding war of position, the prior transformation of cultural common sense, of what people believe is possible, natural, and legitimate. The war of position cannot be won without the right interior orientation. And that orientation begins not with the adversary but with oneself.

This is the foundation of Principle 3: the right mindset is not a preliminary to the real work of democratic resistance. It is the condition of its possibility. The mindset is not a personality trait some leaders happen to possess. It is a discipline, learnable and practicable, that the World Liberty Congress trains its members to develop and sustain.

This essay sets out the principle in nine sections. The first four are conceptual. They explain why the mindset matters, what it consists of, and what the most rigorous traditions of democratic thought have said about it. The remaining five are operational. They translate the principle into daily disciplines, apply it specifically to the work of the WLC as a transnational network, identify the warning signs that signal when the mindset is deteriorating under pressure, offer self-assessment questions for leaders, and propose practical exercises for use in the World Liberty Academy.



SECTION I

The misread enemy: the sociology of authoritarian consent

The first and most consequential error democratic movements commit is the one James C. Scott described in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: reading the public transcript, the visible surface of compliance and apparent regime support, as a straightforward index of actual belief. When the majority of citizens appear to acquiesce to authoritarian rule, democratic actors too easily conclude that they face a society of collaborators, or of the irredeemably cowed. This misreading has strategic consequences that are often fatal, because it converts potential allies into permanent adversaries.

The sociological reality is more complex. Authoritarian systems endure not primarily through naked terror, though terror remains a permanent instrument, but through what Albert Hirschman would recognize as the systematic manipulation of loyalty: the manufacture of attachments, dependencies, and sunk costs that make defection feel individually irrational even when it might be collectively beneficial. Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments demonstrated half a century ago that ordinary human beings, placed within structured authority systems, will perform acts they privately condemn, not out of ideological conviction but out of situational pressure, diffused responsibility, and the social terror of standing apart.

Albert Bandura’s theory of moral disengagement, the cognitive mechanisms by which ordinary people neutralize their own ethical commitments when embedded in authoritarian structures, suggests that many apparent regime supporters are not ideological adversaries. They are people in whom the normal processes of moral reasoning have been interrupted by a political system designed precisely for that purpose. Vaclav Havel, in *The Power of the Powerless*, captured this with the metaphor of the greengrocer who hangs the official slogan in his window, not out of belief, but because not hanging it would require a confrontation with the system that most people are not yet equipped, internally, to sustain.

“The right mindset begins with the refusal to simplify the adversary’s base, and the discipline to ask why people inhabiting authoritarian systems behave as they do, before concluding that they are beyond reach.”

This is not moral relativism. The acts the system demands remain wrong. The greengrocer who refuses to hang the slogan, in Havel’s analysis, is the one whose interior life remains intact. The discipline is to name the wrong without writing off the person performing it. That discipline is what allows movements to grow.



SECTION II

Humility as epistemological discipline

There is a long tradition that treats humility as a moral virtue, a desirable disposition of character. Karl Popper gave it a more rigorous foundation. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, humility is not primarily a virtue but an epistemological necessity: the recognition that all knowledge is provisional, all theories are falsifiable, and that the most dangerous political projects in history have been driven not by malice alone but by a certainty about the final truth of things that foreclosed the possibility of revision.

Jurgen Habermas, building on a different tradition, arrived at a structurally similar conclusion. The communicative rationality at the center of Habermas’s democratic theory rests on epistemic humility: the willingness to enter discourse without having pre-decided its outcome, to subject one’s own convictions to the possibility of transformation through argument, to treat the interlocutor, including the opponent, as a potential source of insight rather than an obstacle to be overcome.

Ronald Heifetz's distinction between technical work and adaptive work in *Leadership on the Line* gives this principle operational form. Technical problems are those for which existing knowledge and established methods are sufficient. The expert can solve them without the wider community changing its understanding. Adaptive problems require something more. They demand that the community itself, including its leaders, revise assumptions, let go of certainties, and develop new capacities. Most of the challenges democratic movements face are adaptive, not technical. Treating them as technical, assuming that if we apply the right formula we will prevail, is the error of the movement that knows everything except how to learn.

In empirical terms, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan documented in *Why Civil Resistance Works* that the campaigns that succeeded consistently demonstrated superior capacities for strategic revision, learning from failure, and expanding their coalition beyond the initial base. The campaigns that failed were disproportionately characterized by epistemic closure: the certainty that the original analysis was correct, the original methods sufficient, the original constituency enough. Humility, in other words, is not only ethically attractive. It is empirically associated with success.



SECTION III

The dialectic of conviction and openness

The most sophisticated objection to the argument so far is the obvious one: that humility and openness, taken too far, shade into relativism, the paralysis of the movement so committed to hearing all perspectives that it can no longer act from clear principle. The objection deserves a serious answer.

Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty offers one framework for what is and is not open to revision. The negative core, the inviolable space of individual freedom from coercion, from arbitrary imprisonment, from the destruction by political power of the conditions of a meaningful life, is not subject to democratic revision. It is the non-negotiable boundary that separates political competition from political persecution. The liberation of political prisoners is not a bargaining position. The restoration of civil and political rights is not one preference among others to be weighed in a utilitarian calculus.

But Berlin is equally clear about the dangers of positive liberty: the freedom to realize a particular vision of the good, imposed on others in the name of their own

authentic interests. The most destructive actors in democratic movements are frequently those who confuse the non-negotiable defense of liberty with the totalizing imposition of a comprehensive doctrine. Conviction becomes fanaticism at precisely the moment it extends the logic of non-negotiability from the core of essential rights to the full range of political and strategic choices.

Adam Michnik, the Polish intellectual and Solidarity strategist, understood this distinction operationally. He insisted on separating enemies from adversaries, and further, separating adversaries who must be defeated from adversaries who might, under the right conditions, become partners in a post-authoritarian transition. The moral precision of Michnik's thought consists precisely in this: he never softened his opposition to the communist regime, and he never reduced every person implicated in that regime to a permanent enemy. Conviction and openness, held simultaneously and with rigor, were the intellectual foundation of Poland's negotiated transition and of the Roundtable Agreement that remains a model for movements navigating similar terrain.

“The leader who has conviction without openness is a fanatic. The leader who has openness without conviction is an opportunist. Both fail. The discipline is to hold them together.”



SECTION IV

Empathy as strategic intelligence

The reduction of empathy to a moral sentiment, desirable but strategically secondary, is one of the most consequential errors in democratic strategy. The evidence from social-movement research consistently points in the opposite direction. Empathy, understood as the disciplined capacity to inhabit the perspective of those you seek to persuade, is not a form of softness. It is a form of intelligence, and its absence produces strategic failure.

Charles Tilly's work on contentious politics demonstrates that successful democratic movements are invariably characterized by their capacity to expand what Tilly called the WUNC performance, Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment, beyond the movement's original core. The structural prerequisite for expanding numbers is the capacity to understand why people who are not yet participants in the movement have, thus far, found it rational or prudent to remain outside. This is

an act of disciplined perspective-taking: the sociological imagination, in C. Wright Mills's formulation, applied not only to structural analysis but to the concrete experience of the individuals those structures have shaped.

Jonathan Powell, who managed the British government's negotiations with the IRA and later studied peace processes globally, concluded in *Talking to Terrorists* that the single most common error in conflict resolution is the mirror-image failure: assuming the adversary's psychology, interests, and decision calculus are structurally identical to one's own. The movements that built durable transitions were those whose leadership had genuinely internalized the perspective of constituencies far removed from their own experience, and used that understanding not to capitulate but to construct the minimum viable common ground on which a broader coalition could stand.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail remains, decades later, among the most strategically sophisticated documents in the history of democratic resistance precisely because of this quality. Its target audience is not the segregationist, whom King does not expect to persuade, but the white moderate who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice. The Letter's force consists in its capacity to inhabit the moderate's moral framework fully enough to demonstrate, from within it, why passivity is untenable. This is empathy deployed as strategic precision.



SECTION V

Practicing the right mindset: an operational discipline

The argument so far has been conceptual. The remainder of this essay is operational. The right mindset is not a quality that some people simply possess. It is a discipline that has to be practiced, sustained against the pressures that prolonged struggle reliably produces, and built into the working habits of movement leadership. The following seven disciplines translate the principle into something a national team can actually do.

Discipline 1. Read the public transcript critically

Train yourself and your leadership team to never confuse silence for support. When citizens appear to comply with the regime, ask what fear, what dependency, what calculation, or what exhaustion is producing the behavior, and which of those

conditions might be reachable. Visible compliance is data about the system, not data about the people inside it.

Discipline 2. Map the spectrum of regime adherents

Resist the temptation to treat regime supporters as a single category. A useful working map distinguishes at least five groups: ideological believers, opportunists who would defect under the right conditions, economic dependents who would defect if they had alternatives, the genuinely afraid, and the disillusioned who have stopped believing but have not yet acted. Each group requires a different message, a different cost-benefit calculation, and a different timeline. A movement that addresses all of them as if they were the first group will not move any of them.

Discipline 3. Practice deliberate perspective-taking

Before any major communication or action, designate one member of the leadership team to articulate, in good faith and at full strength, the perspective of the constituency you are trying to reach. Not a caricature. The strongest version of how that constituency actually understands its situation. The exercise is uncomfortable. It is also one of the most reliable ways to detect strategic blind spots before they produce strategic errors.

Discipline 4. Listen beyond the circle of the convinced

Build into the rhythm of leadership work a regular practice of conversations with people outside the movement: workers, mothers, religious leaders, business owners, public servants, youth, rural citizens. Not to recruit them in those conversations, but to understand what they are seeing, what they are afraid of, what they hope for, and what democratic language, if any, currently speaks to them. A movement that only talks to itself will eventually mistake the volume of its own circle for the size of the country.

Discipline 5. Audit your assumptions

Once per quarter, sit with the leadership team and write down the five most important things you believed about the regime, the society, or the movement six months ago. Mark which ones you still believe, which ones you no longer believe, and which ones you are no longer sure about. Movements that cannot name what they have learned have not learned. Movements that pretend they have not changed their analysis are usually movements whose analysis has stopped being useful.

Discipline 6. Hold the line on the non-negotiable, and only on the non-negotiable

Identify in writing what your movement considers the non-negotiable core: typically the release of political prisoners, the restoration of civil and political rights, the end of arbitrary persecution, the protection of freedom of conscience. Hold that line absolutely. Then hold everything else, including questions of strategy, tactics, sequence, alliance, and policy preference, with deliberate openness. The discipline is to know which is which, and to defend the distinction even when allies pressure you to extend non-negotiability into matters where flexibility is the wiser path.

Discipline 7. Mistrust certainty under pressure

Prolonged struggle produces fatigue, fatigue produces certainty, and certainty produces strategic error. When the leadership team finds itself increasingly sure about everything, that is the moment to slow down, not the moment to accelerate. Build into the team's working culture a positive expectation of doubt. The colleague who says "I am no longer sure about this" is doing the team a favor, not displaying weakness.



SECTION VI

The right mindset in the World Liberty Congress

The WLC is, by design, one of the most plural pro-democracy networks in the world. Its members come from dozens of countries, several major religions, multiple ideological traditions, and at least three generations of activists. Some are former heads of state. Others are former political prisoners. Some lead major opposition parties. Others lead student groups. The languages of the network include Spanish, English, Russian, Arabic, French, Mandarin, Persian, and many others. This pluralism is the source of the network's strength, and it is also the structural condition that requires every member to practice the right mindset as a daily discipline. Without it, the network would fracture along the same fault lines that the regimes work to create.

Three specific applications of this principle deserve attention from every WLC member.

In transnational network meetings

When colleagues from different countries describe their regimes, their tactics, their setbacks, and their analyses, the discipline is to listen for the underlying logic before assuming that the speaker's situation maps onto your own. The Compass principle teaches us that tactics rarely transfer; the Right Mindset principle teaches us how to listen so that the underlying lessons can. A WLC meeting in which everyone is performing certainty about their own context is a meeting in which no one is learning.

In bilateral and regional alliances

The WLC supports cross-border alliances among movements facing comparable challenges. These alliances test the right mindset in concrete ways. A movement from one country that arrives at an alliance with a movement from another, expecting the partner to adopt its framing, its priorities, and its rhythm, is a movement that will undermine the alliance within months. The discipline is to enter the alliance asking what the partner has to teach, and what minimum common ground actually exists, before pushing for what either side wants.

In internal disputes

All organizations have internal disputes. The WLC is no exception. The discipline of the right mindset is what allows internal disputes to remain disputes about how to advance the shared cause, rather than escalating into disputes about whose loyalty is genuine. The Regional Secretaries are available to mediate where members face conflicts that risk damaging the work, and members are encouraged to use them early, before disputes harden into permanent suspicions.

A specific risk for exiles, by exiles, written by people who have been there. Forced exile produces a pattern that the WLC has seen repeatedly across regions: leaders in exile become more rigid, more certain, and more prone to reading internal disagreement as betrayal than the colleagues who remain inside the country. The pressure of distance, of grief, of survivor's guilt, and of the constant need to justify the exile itself, can quietly erode the right mindset over time. The discipline for exiled leaders is to recognize this risk, to seek out colleagues willing to challenge them, and to treat reports from inside the country as primary data even when they complicate the public narrative the exile community has built. This is one of the most demanding applications of the principle, and one of the most important.



SECTION VII

Warning signs: how to recognize when the mindset is deteriorating

The right mindset does not deteriorate in dramatic ways. It deteriorates quietly, under the weight of fatigue, repression, internal conflict, and the long absence of victory. The early warning signs are subtle, and most leadership teams do not notice them until they are well advanced. The following list is offered as a periodic self-check. If three or more of these patterns are present in your team's working life, the mindset is degrading, and the team needs a deliberate reset before the strategic consequences arrive.

- Allies are increasingly described as not committed enough, not principled enough, or not loyal enough.
- Tactical disagreements within the leadership are increasingly read as moral failures rather than strategic differences.
- Public messaging has become progressively more extreme, more confrontational, and less interested in persuading anyone outside the existing base.
- The team has stopped asking what the regime is actually trying to achieve, and instead assumes the regime's motives are obvious.
- New voices, especially younger voices and voices from outside the movement's usual circles, are increasingly framed as naive or compromised.
- The leadership group meets less frequently with people who disagree with it.
- Internal humor has disappeared. Meetings are uniformly grim, even when nothing acutely bad has just happened.
- Decisions are increasingly justified by reference to past sacrifices rather than current analysis.
- The team finds itself surprised more often by regime moves, by allied behavior, or by public reactions than it was a year ago.
- The phrase "we already know" appears more often than the phrase "we should find out."

When several of these signs appear together, the response is not despair. It is deliberate recovery. Schedule a leadership retreat. Bring in an outside facilitator, possibly through the World Liberty Academy. Conduct an assumption audit. Expand the circle of voices the team is hearing from. Treat the deterioration as a strategic problem requiring a strategic response, the same way you would treat a degradation in any other operational capacity.



SECTION VIII**Self-assessment questions for leaders**

The following questions are meant for periodic personal and team review. They are not meant to be answered quickly or politely. The honest answers are the useful ones. Members are encouraged to revisit them once per quarter, and to use them as the agenda of an annual leadership reflection.

ABOUT YOURSELF

- › *Which of my convictions do I hold because I have tested them, and which do I hold because I have repeated them?*
- › *When was the last time I genuinely changed my mind about something significant in this work?*
- › *Whose judgment do I rely on to challenge my own, and have I made it safe for them to do so?*
- › *Am I tired in ways that are affecting my analysis, and have I admitted it to anyone?*
- › *What am I afraid of in this struggle that I have never said out loud?*

ABOUT YOUR MOVEMENT

- › *Who is currently being treated as an opponent inside our coalition who might, with care, be brought back?*
- › *Whose perspective have we stopped taking seriously, and at what cost?*
- › *What does our internal language sound like to a sympathetic outsider, and would they recognize the movement we describe?*
- › *What part of our analysis has not been updated in the last year, and is that because the analysis is still right, or because we have stopped questioning it?*
- › *Are we recruiting only people who already agree with us, and is that producing the size of movement we need?*

ABOUT YOUR ADVERSARY

- › *Can I describe, without caricature, the strongest internal logic of the regime's position?*
- › *Who inside the regime, or among its supporters, is reachable, and what would reaching them require?*
- › *What is the regime currently afraid of, and how do I know?*
- › *What part of the regime's base have I written off, and is that decision strategically sound or emotionally convenient?*

- › *If I were running the regime, what would I be doing to a movement like ours right now?*

These questions can be answered privately, in pairs, or as a leadership group. The most useful version, when conditions allow, is the version answered in writing and then discussed with one trusted colleague who is willing to challenge the answers. The discipline is in the asking, not in the cleverness of the response.



SECTION IX

Practical exercises for the World Liberty Academy

The right mindset is built through practice. The five exercises below are used in WLC Academy workshops and can be adapted for any leadership retreat, training session, or coalition meeting. They are most effective when used in sequence, but each can stand alone.

Exercise 1. The empathy briefing

One member of the leadership team is assigned to deliver, in good faith and at full strength, the regime's perspective on a current event. Not a caricature, not a denunciation, but the strongest version of how a thoughtful regime supporter would understand the situation. Other team members listen without interrupting, then identify the elements of that briefing they had not previously considered. The exercise reliably surfaces blind spots and improves subsequent strategic decisions.

Exercise 2. The assumption audit

Each member of the leadership team writes down five assumptions they held about the regime, the society, or the movement six months ago, and marks each one as still confirmed, now disconfirmed, or no longer certain. The team then compares notes. The patterns that emerge across team members, what everyone has updated, what no one has, and where the team disagrees, become the basis for the next strategic review.

Exercise 3. The unlikely ally

Each participant identifies one actor with whom they significantly disagree on policy or ideology, but who shares the minimum democratic agreement (release of political prisoners, restoration of civil and political rights, rejection of arbitrary power). Participants then sketch what a working alliance with that actor would require: shared minimum, areas of disagreement bracketed, communication rules.

The exercise builds the muscle of distinguishing legitimate pluralism from anti-democratic behavior, which is the operational core of Principle 1.

Exercise 4. The hostile reading

The team is given a document produced by the regime: a speech, a decree, an editorial, a propaganda piece. The task is to read it carefully and articulate the strongest argument it makes, without dismissing it. Then, and only then, the team articulates the most precise rebuttal. The discipline is to defeat the strongest version of the opponent's argument, not the weakest. This is what philosophers call steelmanning, and it is one of the most reliable practices for keeping a movement's analysis sharp.

Exercise 5. The reconciliation rehearsal

Participants are asked to imagine a credible democratic transition five years from now and to identify, by name or category, three actors currently associated with the regime with whom they would, under those conditions, sit at a negotiating table. They then sketch the conditions under which such a conversation could happen, what the negotiable terms would be, and what would have to remain non-negotiable. The exercise is uncomfortable, and it is exactly the kind of thinking that distinguishes movements that can govern from movements that can only resist.



CONCLUSION

The mindset as method

Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, identified the totalitarian personality not in terms of ideology but in terms of a cognitive style: a refusal of complexity, a need for absolute certainty, an intolerance for the ambiguity that characterizes all genuine political life. The democratic personality, if we can speak of such a thing without sentimentality, is defined by the opposite orientation: the capacity to hold complexity without collapsing it, to act under uncertainty without claiming false certainty, to maintain conviction without surrendering curiosity.

Karl Popper's open society is not, finally, a constitutional arrangement. It is a practice of mind: the permanent willingness to subject one's own most fundamental assumptions to the test of evidence and argument. Vaclav Havel's living in truth is not a program but a posture: the refusal to perform compliance with claims one knows to be false, regardless of personal cost. Adam Michnik's political wisdom was not primarily strategic but epistemic: the conviction that the future is genuinely

open, that allies can emerge from unexpected places, and that the reduction of political life to permanent warfare between fixed camps is itself a form of authoritarian thinking.

The right mindset is not a set of attitudes to be adopted. It is a set of intellectual disciplines to be practiced, continuously and against the grain of the pressures that prolonged struggle reliably produces: the temptation toward certainty when uncertainty is exhausting, toward contempt when empathy is costly, toward the comfort of a closed circle when the outside world is hostile and complex. Democracies are built not only by people with correct institutional designs. They are built by people who have learned how to think democratically, about power, about others, about themselves, about the difference between what they know and what they merely believe.

The struggle begins on the inside.

Empathy is intelligence under pressure.

Conviction without openness becomes fanaticism.

Openness without conviction becomes opportunism.

The mindset is never finished. Its discipline is to begin again.

For WLC members, this principle is not optional. It is what allows a transnational network of movements, with all our differences, to act as one. The discipline is harder than courage. It is also more durable, and over the years and decades that this struggle requires, durability is what wins.

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CONTINUE TO PRINCIPLE 4

Principle 4 of the Playbook for Liberty is Strategizing as a Continuous Process. It explains why strategy must become a living discipline rather than a document, and offers the operational tools, including the WLC Adaptive Strategy Canvas and After-Action Review, that turn the right mindset into effective movement practice.

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