

ALERTNESS

Being aware of what is taking place around me so I can respond appropriately

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MAGAZINE
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FROM WATCH TO WARNING: KEEPING OUR EYES ON THE HORIZON

Dr. Andrea Stark Bishop

I grew up in Oklahoma where children learn to be weather aware at a young age. I can't remember a time when I didn't know the difference between a Tornado Watch and a Tornado Warning. For my dad, who loved a good storm, a Tornado Watch meant exactly that: sitting in the garage with the door wide open watching the storm move across the horizon.

Inside the house, meteorologist Gary England and the Doppler radar spoke from the television. In the garage, we listened to the radio for updates. During a Tornado Watch, our eyes stayed on the sky, supplies were nearby, and we remained alert to see what might happen.

As I said, Dad loved a good storm. He loved the smell of the rain as it

swept in, the crack of thunder, and the swirling wind as cool air clashed with warm. As a former high school science teacher who later became a school superintendent, I think he loved the science of storms. As a father and leader, he was well prepared, on alert, and ready to act when the Watch changed to Warning.

Our family knew exactly where to go and what to do when that happened. Our neighbors generously opened their storm cellar, one of my favorite places to visit. They kept cans of Coca-Cola and boxes of animal crackers on hand, along with board games and old toys tucked beneath the benches. Even now I can picture my dad standing at the top of the cellar steps, watching the sky until the door needed to close, standing between me and the storm.

Because my dad stayed calm in a storm, I never learned to fear them. Instead, he modeled what good leaders do before, during, and after a crisis: prepare, watch, assess, and act.

This is the value of alertness.

Alertness is not panic, anxiety, or fear. It is the discipline of paying

attention and responding with calm clarity. Alert leaders notice changes others miss. They remain steady when conditions shift and respond quickly when action becomes necessary. It is the kind of leadership most of us hope to practice and the kind we are grateful to follow.

Our writers this month explore alertness from several perspectives. One leader reflects on the connection between slowing down and staying alert. Another shares a story of what happens when alertness is absent. We offer coaching insights on the lost art of noticing, practical advice for exhausted parents, and a remarkable leadership lesson drawn from NASA.

In our daily routines, it's easy to miss when conditions shift from Watch to Warning. Remaining alert helps us recognize those changes and respond with wisdom when the winds begin to turn.

Until next time,

Andrea Bishop

Editor | Character Core

"Be alert. The most important things in life are seldom the most obvious."

JONATHAN LOCKWOOD HUIE

Cover Photo © Christie Mellor Photography

Questions? Comments?

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Dr. Andrea Stark Bishop is passionate about helping leaders become more confident communicators. Her mantra is that good leadership requires great communication. With a PhD in Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication, she is a powerful educator, writer, editor, and leader.

SPOTLIGHT

Character Spotlight: Dr. Michael Cauley, Nashville, TN

SLOWING DOWN TO LEAD WELL: RELATIONSHIPS, REACTIONS, AND RESPONSES

Dr. Andrea Stark Bishop

Dr. Michael Cauley wears many titles – associate professor at Lipscomb University, research fellow at Vanderbilt University, chaplain in the United States Air Force Reserve, and leadership coach. Yet when asked how he prefers to be described, he doesn't hesitate: "Father. Husband. Those are the titles that matter most."

That relational orientation shapes his philosophy of leadership and his view on the value of an alert leader.

For Dr. Cauley, alertness is not hypervigilance or constant reactivity. It is the disciplined practice of slowing down. In a life that spans academia, research, military service, and coaching, Cauley knows that busyness is unavoidable. But he is quick to state that moving from busy to productive requires intentionality and self-awareness. Yet those qualities alone do not create alertness. "Alertness" Cauley explains, "is a result of slowing down."

His military training reinforced this discipline. The most important lesson he learned in officer training was simple: *Stay calm*. He says, "When things push us to be reactive, we need train ourselves to stay calm, to reframe that urgent awareness toward intentionality." Reaction, he argues, is often counterproductive because it captures only part of our intention. He adds, "When I need to make a quick decision, it cannot be from a place of reaction. It has to be wise, grounded, and intentional. That means I need to review. Assess. Then respond. To be alert, I also need to be calm."

Cauley adds that alertness is central to executive presence, a specialty in his coaching practice. Cauley explains that leaders with strong executive presence do not rush to fill silence. They let others finish speaking. He says such leaders pause – sometimes for 15 seconds or more – before responding. While silence may feel uncomfortable, Cauley believes it is a source of strength. In those quiet moments, leaders demonstrate their steadiness and confidence.

Cauley situates alertness at the intersection of listening and trust. For him, alert leaders are not simply aware of what is happening around them; they are attentive to people. "Alertness signals awareness," he explains, "awareness of people, of culture, of subtle shifts in morale. But awareness alone is insufficient for trust. Trust requires listening and



action." Cauley notes that organizations which rely solely on anonymous surveys to "listen" often miss the relational dimension that fosters genuine trust. "Alert leaders," he suggests, "create space for conversation, not just data collection."

"When I need to make a quick decision, it cannot be from a place of reaction. It has to be wise, grounded, and intentional. That means I need to review. Assess. Then respond. To be alert, I also need to be calm."

For leaders seeking one practical starting point for improving alertness, Cauley's advice is simple: When someone brings you a concern, listen. Let them talk. Let them finish. Then pause. Think. Only then, respond intentionally.

In a world that rewards speed, Dr. Michael Cauley makes a compelling case that the most powerful leadership move may be to slow down.

ICF certified workplace coach Morgan De La Peña is known to her friends and family as a life-long learner. While she is passionate about her career as an emergent leader in the logistics industry, she prizes her education above all – in the classroom and in life. With degrees in English, Museum Studies, and Organizational Leadership, she thrives on inspiring creativity, collaboration, and innovative solutions.



DON'T FORGET THE RAISINS: RAISING OUR ALERTNESS

Morgan de la Peña

One of the most underrated workplace skills is alertness or the ability to stay aware not just of our own tasks, but of the broader system around us. Many slowdowns happen not from lack of effort, but because someone didn't notice what was happening in real time. Being alert means watching for patterns, bottlenecks, and unintended consequences before they grow into bigger problems.

I was reminded of this during a volunteer event with my company, where employees gathered to assemble meal kits for families in need. The process was organized like an assembly line. One volunteer built the cardboard boxes, another added canned goods, another placed mashed potato flakes, and so on down the table. Each person had a clearly defined station, and as long as every step stayed in rhythm, the system moved quickly and efficiently. My role happened to be at the Pecan Station.

At first, everything ran smoothly. Each volunteer completed their task and slid the box to the next station. After a while, however, something changed near the end of the line. One volunteer noticed the final box-taping station getting backed up and stepped in to help. Their instinct was generous and understandable; most of us want to help when we see someone struggling. In helping the final station, however, the volunteer

left their own station – the Raisin Station – unattended.

While they focused on taping boxes shut, the raisin station fell behind. One box became several, and soon a stack of boxes waiting for raisins blocked the line. With no space for new boxes, the twenty-station assembly line quickly came to a standstill. The problem wasn't effort. It was awareness. No one was watching the system as a whole. When the organizer stepped in to cover the raisin station, the line started moving again. **The moment stuck with me because it illustrated an important organizational truth: good intentions do not replace situational awareness.**

Alertness in the workplace requires us to periodically step back from our immediate activity and ask a broader question: *What is happening across the system right now?* Without that awareness, we risk solving the wrong problem...or unintentionally creating new ones. Helping others is admirable, and collaboration is essential, but effective workers balance generosity with awareness of how their own role affects the larger operation.

Since that event, I've tried to build a simple habit before stepping in to help elsewhere. I pause and scan the system. Is my own station stable? Will my absence create a bottleneck somewhere else? Alertness rarely looks dramatic. More often it shows up as quietly noticing what others miss.

Sometimes leadership is simply about raising our alertness before small issues turn into bigger problems – or before someone else has to remind us about the raisins.



“Helping others is admirable, and collaboration is essential, but effective workers balance generosity with awareness of how their own role affects the larger operation.”



Dr. Marlin Blankenship has spent a lifetime helping others achieve personal and professional success and live balanced, happy lives. Marlin is the Director of Coaching at Strata Leadership and a professional certified coach through the International Coaching Federation.

THE LOST ART OF NOTICING

Dr. Marlin Blankenship

We seem to be losing the ability to notice.

I was recently in a class with an instructor who talked for forty-five minutes straight. What he didn't see – because he was *talking* instead of *noticing* – was half the room checking their phones and the other half mentally checking out. Had he been more alert, he would have noticed the shift and adjusted his approach to re-engage the audience. Instead, he simply didn't notice when he lost the attention and trust of the group.

To notice that shift, we need to be alert.

Paying attention is like a muscle. Use it, and it grows stronger. Ignore it, and it weakens. In today's world of Smart Everything and Endless Notifications, that muscle is under constant strain. Distractions are everywhere. They pull our focus away from what matters most, making workplaces less safe, relationships less stable, and important moments easier to miss.

My challenge for you this month is simple: Exercise your attention muscles and see how different your world becomes. Here are two simple ways to start:

First, intentionally put distractions away. Hide your phone. Take off the smart watch. Lose the headphones for a while. Anything that pulls your attention away from the people and environment around you weakens your ability to stay alert.

Second, practice noticing. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What is your intuition – your quiet inner voice – telling you about the situation you're in? What is the attitude of your team today? How do you feel after lunch, and what might that say about what you ate? Noticing isn't about judging. It's about awareness. And if you aren't aware, you can't be alert.

I challenge you to consistently put away distractions and intentionally practice noticing. You cannot be alert if you

are not noticing, and you cannot notice if you are constantly distracted. Like any discipline, alertness must be trained. The training doesn't need to be extreme, but it does need to be consistent.

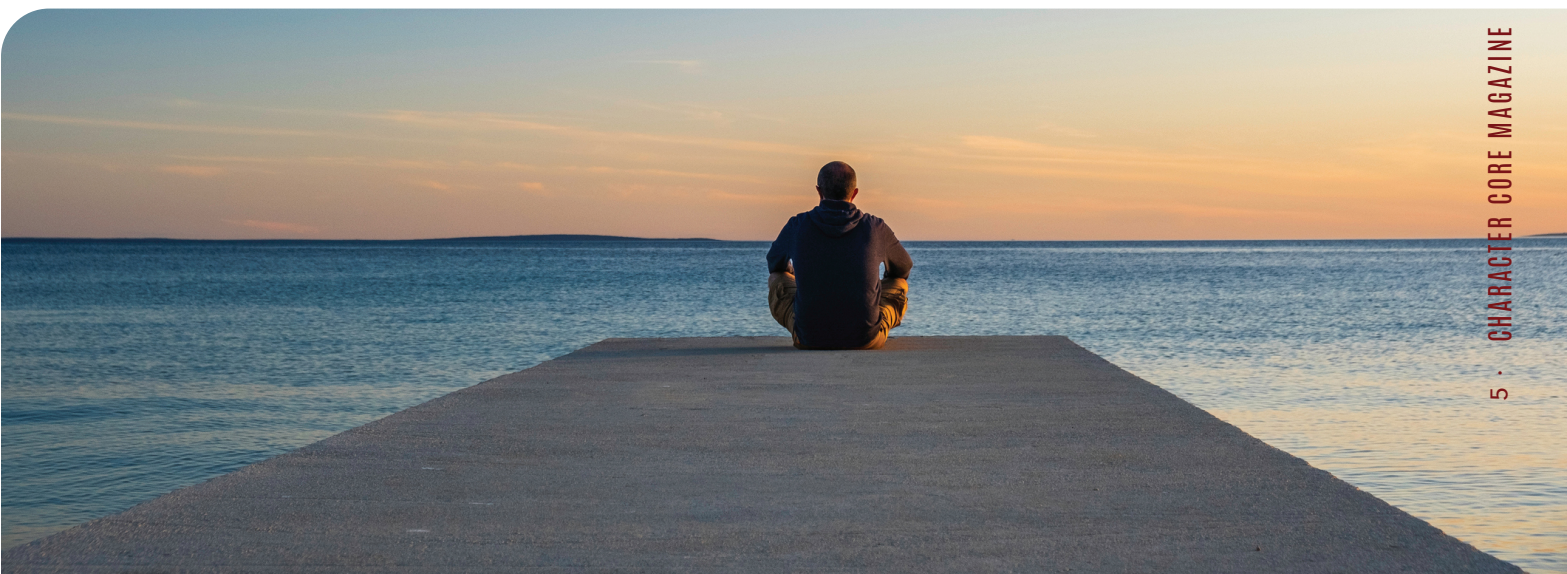
"I challenge you to consistently put away distractions and intentionally practice noticing. You cannot be alert if you are not noticing, and you cannot notice if you are constantly distracted."

The more you practice noticing, the more you'll pick up on small clues: tension at work before it becomes conflict, something important about your spouse you hadn't noticed before, a coworker who might become a friend, a slick floor, or a loose machine guard that could risk a life or limb.

As you practice alertness this month, these questions may help you self-coach:

- What would it look like for you to give someone your full attention today?
- What is the emotional tone of your team this month? What clues helped you notice it?
- What one habit could help you stay more attentive to the people around you?
- When during your day could you pause for one minute simply to observe your environment?

Like many character traits, alertness is simple, but it certainly isn't easy. Like other worthy endeavors, it takes practice. Let's reclaim the art of noticing.



Vivian Soto Espinal juggles her roles as mom, educator, and leadership trainer by focusing on making goal-driven choices each day. A multilingual, experienced leader and educator in international spaces, she's passionate about community building and encouraging students and parents on their personal and professional journeys.



ALERT, NOT ALARMED: RETHINKING VIGILANCE IN PARENTING

Vivian Soto Espinal



As a first-time mom, I wore my flight-or-fight mentality like my best running shoes. Slipping on quite naturally, hypervigilance became the posture I never took off. I scanned constantly for danger, turning everyday moments into mental risk assessments. Parenthood became a game of “what if” instead of “what is.”

Without realizing it, I had normalized a hypervigilant mindset.

In this constant state of tension, our engagement with our children becomes reactive rather than responsive. We may adopt what is meant to be temporary – our body's surge of energy in response to real threats – as our default mode. And as our stress responders remain activated, we may begin to read our child's cues through a lens of urgency and fear.

Hypervigilant parenting quietly works against us. Over time, it shapes the way we interpret our child's behavior, deepens our fatigue, and erodes our emotional regulation. Many of us live in this quiet state of hypervigilance, where genuine care slowly shifts into constant tension.

Rather than hypervigilance, let's strive for a healthy parental alertness that is aware, conscious, and attuned. While hypervigilance forces a narrow, fearful focus, healthy alertness widens

our perspective to see the whole moment clearly. Where hypervigilance creates urgency, healthy alertness creates clarity and connection.

HEALTHY ALERTNESS LOOKS LIKE:

- Observing instead of scanning. Allow your child to explore the playground without rehearsing every possible danger. Quietly ask yourself, “Is there an actual risk right now, or is my child simply learning?”
- Responding instead of reacting. Pause before addressing a spilled cup or rising tantrum. Take a breath and ask yourself, “What does this moment actually need from me?”
- Noticing cues without assuming crisis. Recognize an after-school meltdown as fatigue or overstimulation rather than a sign something is wrong. Ask yourself, “What might my child be communicating?”
- Choosing connection mode over survival mode. Ground yourself and your child before correcting or redirecting. Remember, “Connection first. Correction next.”

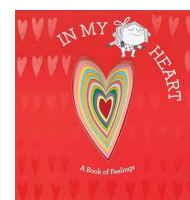
“Hypervigilant parenting quietly works against us. Over time, it shapes the way we interpret our child's behavior, deepens our fatigue, and erodes our emotional regulation.”

Looking back, I see how easily the responsibility of parenthood can pull us toward fear-based responses. **But parenthood was never meant to be lived from a constant state of alarm.** To change the narrative, the shift begins in small pauses. The next time your body tenses, take a breath and ask, “Is this a real danger, or a moment of learning?”

Good parenting does not require perfect vigilance. Good parenting requires presence. **Healthy alertness is calm, intentional, and grounded.** It helps us stay connected and aware of “what is” without being consumed by “what-ifs.”

Vivian recommends:

In My Heart: A Book of Feelings by Jo Witek
El Monstruo de Colores by Anna Llenas





Dr. Nathan Mellor has a passion for serving leaders. Through his writing, speaking engagements, and coaching, he helps leaders shape their company culture to reflect their commitment to character and competence. Nathan earned a doctorate in organizational leadership from Pepperdine University and serves as CEO of Strata Leadership.

FLIGHT, TRY SCE TO AUX

Dr. Nathan Mellor, PCC

The sky was filled with thick, low clouds over Cape Canaveral on November 14, 1969. It was a cool morning, and rain pelted NASA's towering Saturn V rocket. If all went according to plan, the crew of Apollo 12 would become the second team of astronauts to land on the moon. When the engines ignited, the rocket clawed upward into the clouds.

Just 36.5 seconds into flight, lightning struck the spacecraft. A few seconds later, lightning struck again. In Mission Control, engineers stared in disbelief as their screens suddenly went blank. When the data returned, it made no sense. Telemetry readings were scrambled; key systems appeared to be failing. In a terrifying instant, the team had lost their ability to understand what was happening onboard the spacecraft carrying three astronauts.

With the world watching, a decision had to be made quickly. Mission Control could abort the flight or risk continuing without reliable data. Confusion and anxiety spread through the room as some of the brightest engineers on the planet tried to diagnose the problem in real time. In the middle of the chaos, 26-year-old flight controller John Aaron watched the data carefully.

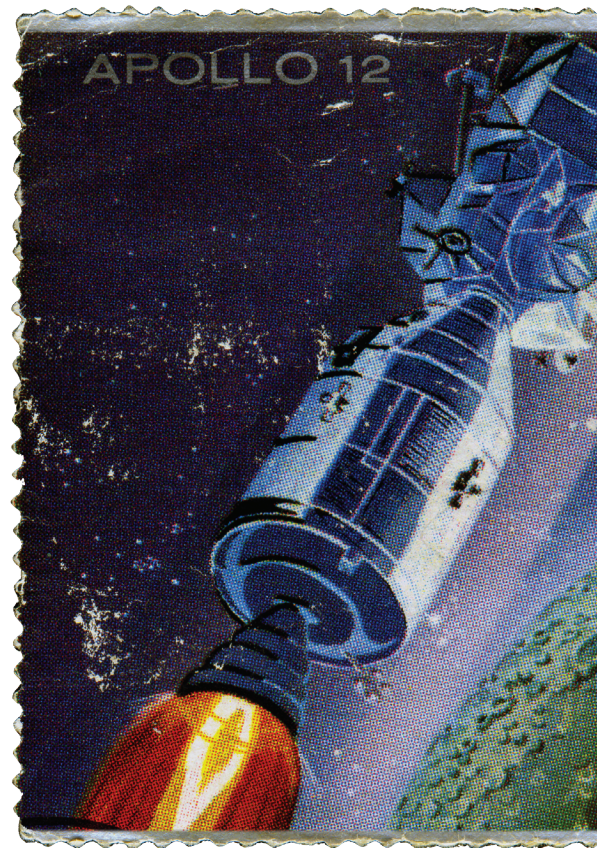
A year earlier, during a routine test, Aaron had seen something similar. A power fluctuation had knocked

several systems offline, scrambling telemetry data. When the test ended, most engineers moved on, but Aaron remained curious. He studied the anomaly until he understood what had happened and why.

When lightning struck Apollo 12, Aaron immediately saw a pattern. The spacecraft's Signal Conditioning Equipment (SCE) had switched into a faulty power mode. The data was not gone. It was simply scrambled. Speaking calmly into the tense silence of Mission Control, Aaron said, "Flight, try SCE to AUX."

The instruction was so obscure it had to be repeated. Most engineers in Mission Control did not recognize the command. Fortunately, Lunar Module Pilot Alan Bean remembered the auxiliary (AUX) switch from training. When he flipped it, the spacecraft's systems came back to life. Telemetry returned, guidance stabilized, and Mission Control regained visibility as Apollo 12 continued its mission.

Aaron wasn't lucky. His response was the result of cultivated alertness. *Character Core* defines alertness as "being aware of what is taking place around me so I can respond appropriately." He noticed what others overlooked, studied it, and recalled it when the pressure was highest. Alert leaders recognize patterns, connect information others



miss, and respond with clarity when confusion spreads.

Organizations face their own lightning strikes. Systems fail, customers leave, and markets shift unexpectedly. In those moments, the difference is often a leader who has been paying attention all along.

"Alert leaders recognize patterns, connect information others miss, and respond with clarity when confusion spreads."

DISCUSS

KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN

- Where might you be missing important signals or opportunities?
- When have you noticed something others missed? What helped you stay alert in that moment?

ACT IMMEDIATELY

- When you notice something important, what typically helps you move from awareness to action?
- Think of a moment when responding quickly made a difference. What did that experience teach you?

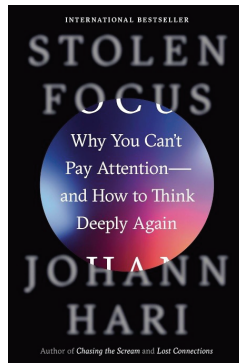
ANALYZE THE RESULTS

- After taking action, how do you pause to evaluate what actually happened and what you learned?
- What signals tell you that an action worked well or that it needs adjustment?

BOOK: *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—And How to Think Deeply Again* by Johann Hari

Stolen Focus explores why our ability to pay attention is collapsing and explains why teens can only focus on a task for about 65 seconds at a time while office workers average only about three minutes.

Why we recommend it: This book reframes distraction as a structural problem and offers research-based insights for reclaiming focus – helping leaders, professionals, and students better understand attention, productivity, and the hidden forces shaping modern work.



PODCAST: *Dare to Lead Podcast* with Brené Brown

EPISODE: *Lock-In and Lock-Through Power*

In this episode, Brené Brown offers an excerpt from her book *Strong Ground* and explores the difficulty many of us have in transitioning from work to home or from professional to personal.

Why we recommend it: If you've ever had to sit in your car at the end of the day and mentally prepare to leave your work personae and put on your home personae, this episode offers a "locking through" process to help you transition more intentionally from one role to the next.



CIPLINE TOLERANCE ENTHUSIASM HUMILITY ALERTNESS FLEXIBILITY COURAGE PUNCTUALITY RESILIENCE

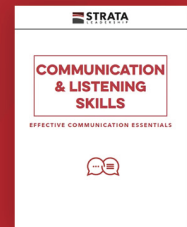


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