

Psychology of success

7 mental skills of high-
performing teams

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Want to improve performance?

According to high-performance psychologist Dr. Michael Gervais, we can strengthen our abilities in three core areas—our craft, our body, and our mind.

As a psychologist, Gervais' focus is the mind, a powerful yet often under-realized tool for optimizing personal performance.

Gervais' work has been featured in many places—from the Wall Street Journal and New York Times to ESPN and Wired—but perhaps he's best known as a sports psychologist for the Seattle Seahawks and co-creator (with Seahawks coach Pete Carroll) of "Compete to Create," a firm that works with Fortune 500 companies to help everyone from CEOs to sales reps excel with mind-set training.

Gervais has proven that our mental practices help us reveal and realize our true potential, and that those same practices are the key to cultivating high-performing teams.

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What is “high-performance” psychology?

While traditional psychology primarily focuses on mental disorders and dysfunction—i.e., fixing something that’s broken—the field of high-performance psychology is designed to help individuals and teams who may be performing well already, but who have bold ambitions and want to elevate their game to an elite level.

For this approach, Gervais and his colleagues examine the most exceptional thinkers and doers, studying the psychological skills they use to navigate high-pressure, high-stakes environments. “High-performance psychology has its grounding in cognitive behavioral training and evidence-based approaches,” says Gervais.

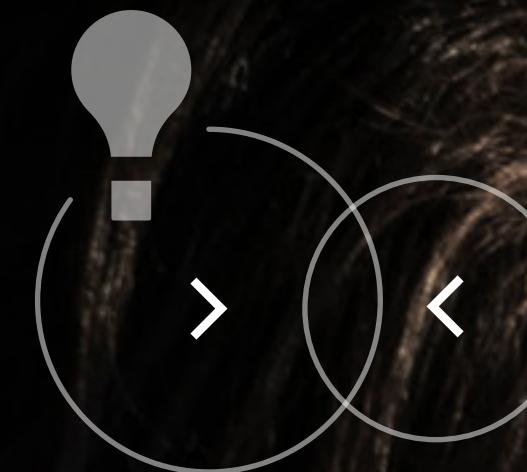
“But it also shares a deep appreciation of mindfulness and philosophical traditions.”

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The science of teamwork

These same principles that power individual performance translate directly into team performance.

"No one is smart enough, strong enough, or capable enough to do the extraordinary things that change the world by themselves," says Gervais. "We need each other to do the extraordinary." This is no less true in a business environment. Humans are social animals, and the fabric of relationships is what defines our culture, whether we're forming a sports team or an IT team.

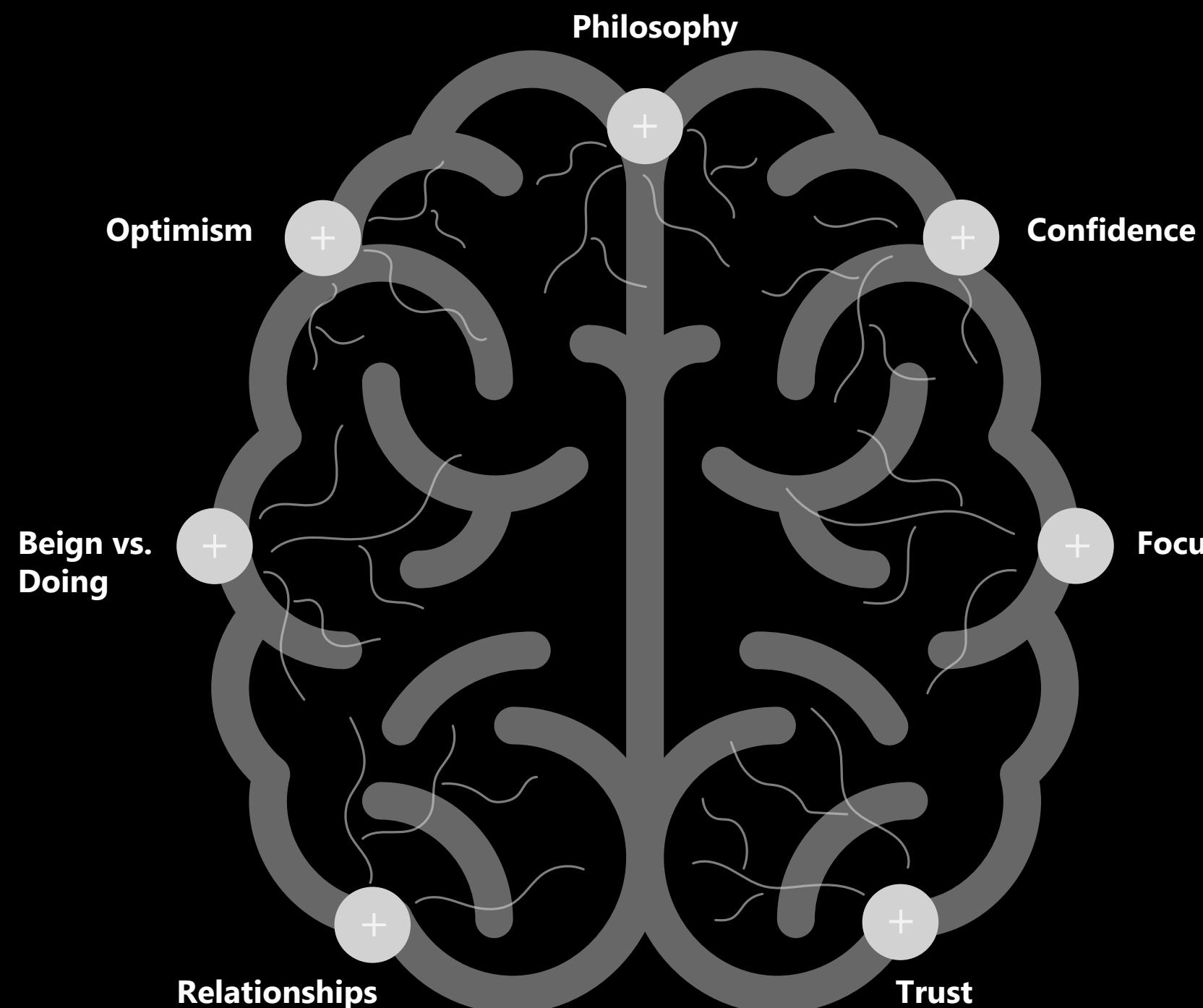
"The stronger the skills that an individual has internally, the greater their effect on the rest of the team, like a pebble in a pond," says Gervais.

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Note: Nodes do not reference actual locations
in brain that correspond to skills.

7 mental skills for high performance

Numerous research studies have shown the benefits behind the following seven mental skills. Gervais works on these and other skills to inspire excellence in teams.

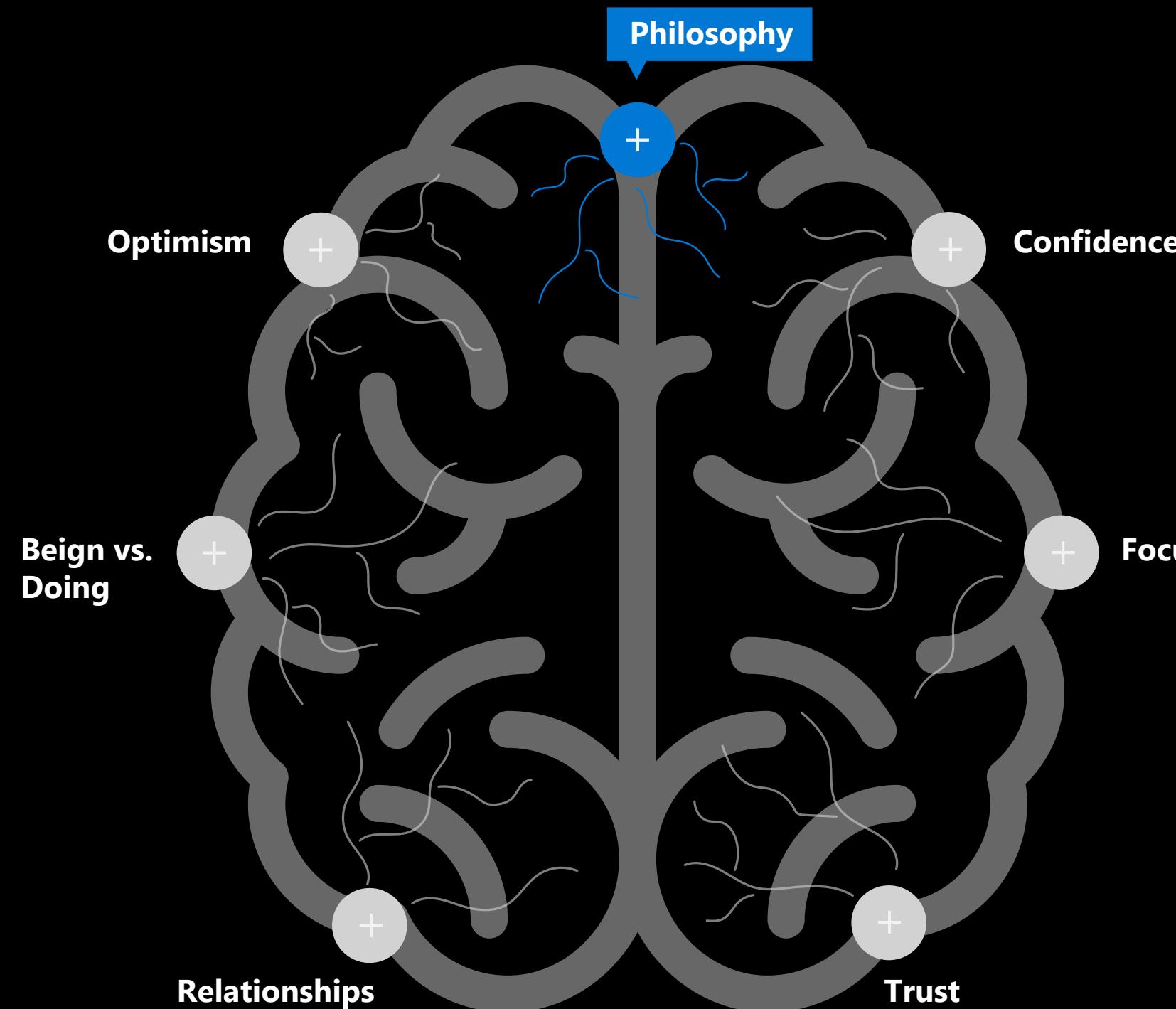
1. Knowing your personal philosophy
2. Generating calm and confidence
3. Maintaining deep focus in the moment
4. Trusting oneself and others
5. "Front-loading" relationships
6. Focusing on being our best, not doing our best
7. Cultivating optimism

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1. Knowing your personal philosophy

Only 28% of U.S. workers view the role of work in their lives with a sense of purpose and as a primary source of personal fulfillment.¹ That's a big difference compared to world-leading performers, who are relentless about pursuing their "best."

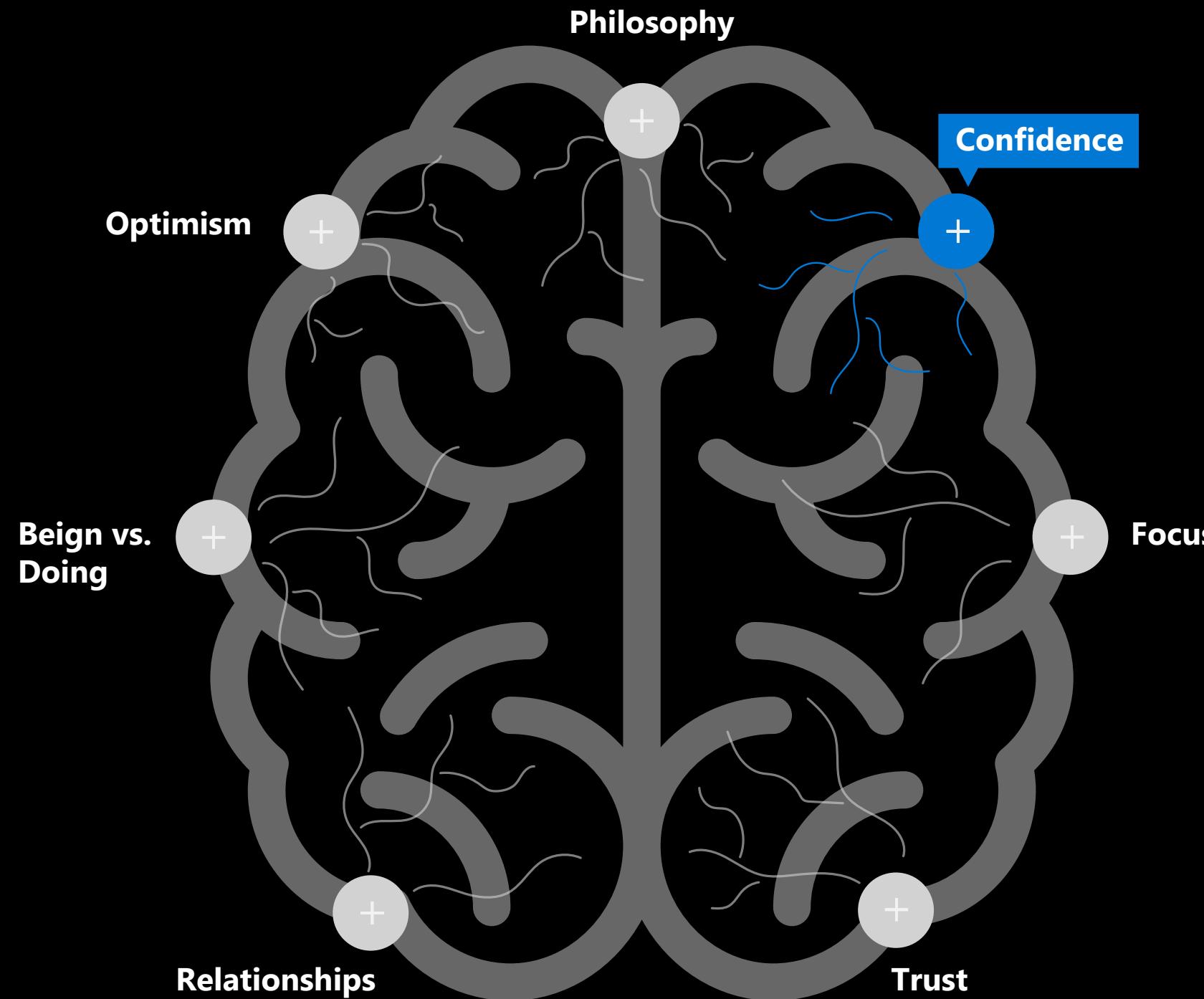
But how do those top performers define "best"? Many of them explicitly write down their guiding principles in advance, so that they have a way to evaluate their own performance. They may also capture specific phrases that help influence their thoughts and actions. Studies have shown that this kind of personal philosophy enhances positive meaning in the workplace² and is even linked to career adaptability.^{3,4}

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2. Generating calm and confidence

Numerous research studies show that occupational pressure is the leading cause of stress for adults: 80% of workers in the United States feel stress from their job, and 50% report they need help learning how to manage their stress.⁵ In a high-pressure, high-stress workplace, the ability to generate calm and confidence is even more important for performance.

"Confidence only comes from one place: what we say to ourselves," says Gervais. "That's up to us, to find the things that we say to ourselves that build, as opposed to constrict or confine."

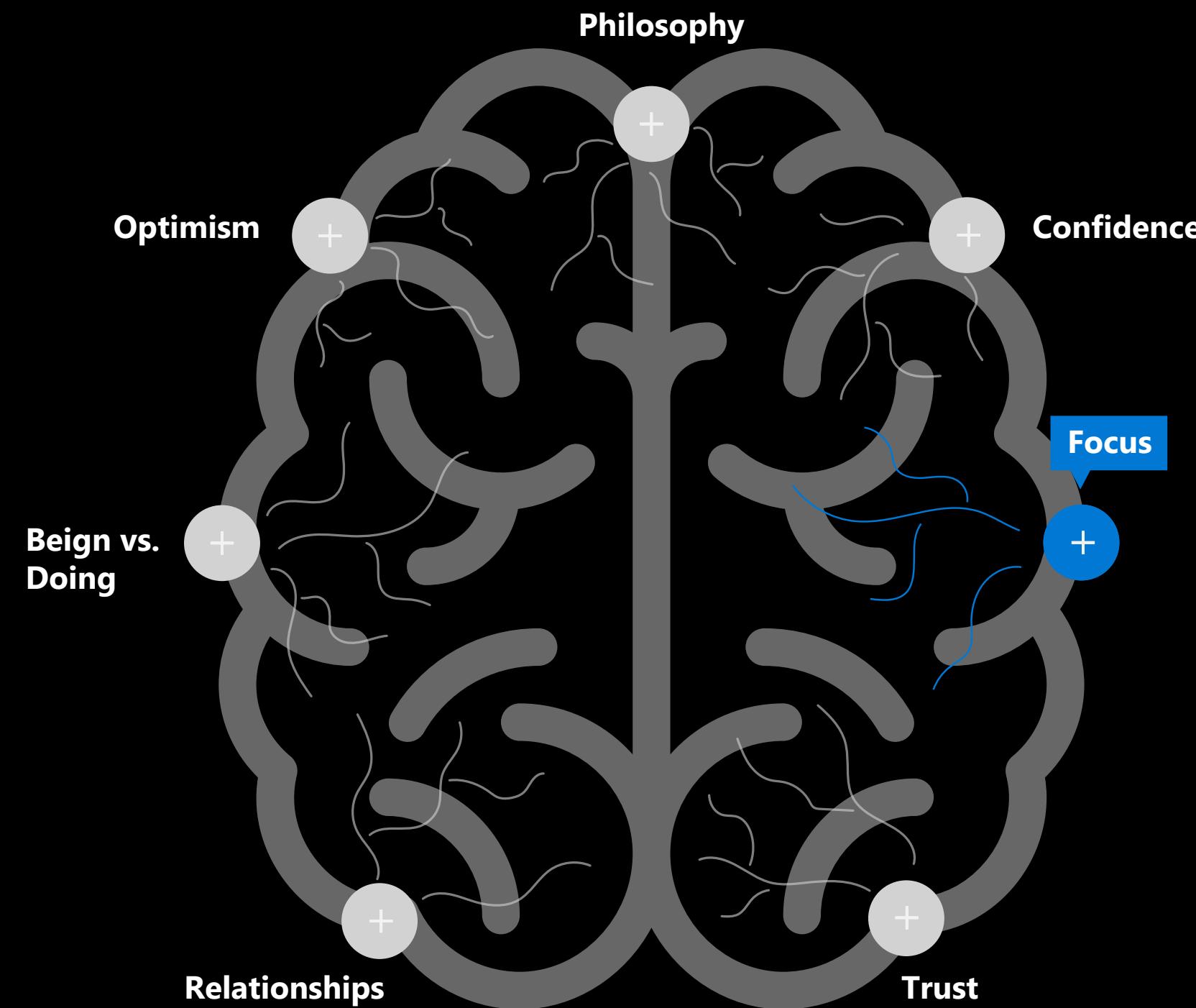
Focused, mindful breathing is an ancient practice for generating calm, and many studies reinforce how it helps regulate emotions and tolerance for distress.⁶ Even brief sessions of mindful breathing can reduce mind-wandering and improve sustained attention,⁷ as well as enhance social communication among co-workers.⁸

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3. Maintaining deep focus in the moment

The ability to maintain deep focus, even under elevated stress, is one of the most essential skills for high performers. Not only does it promote mental toughness,⁹ but refocus training can also modulate boredom.¹⁰

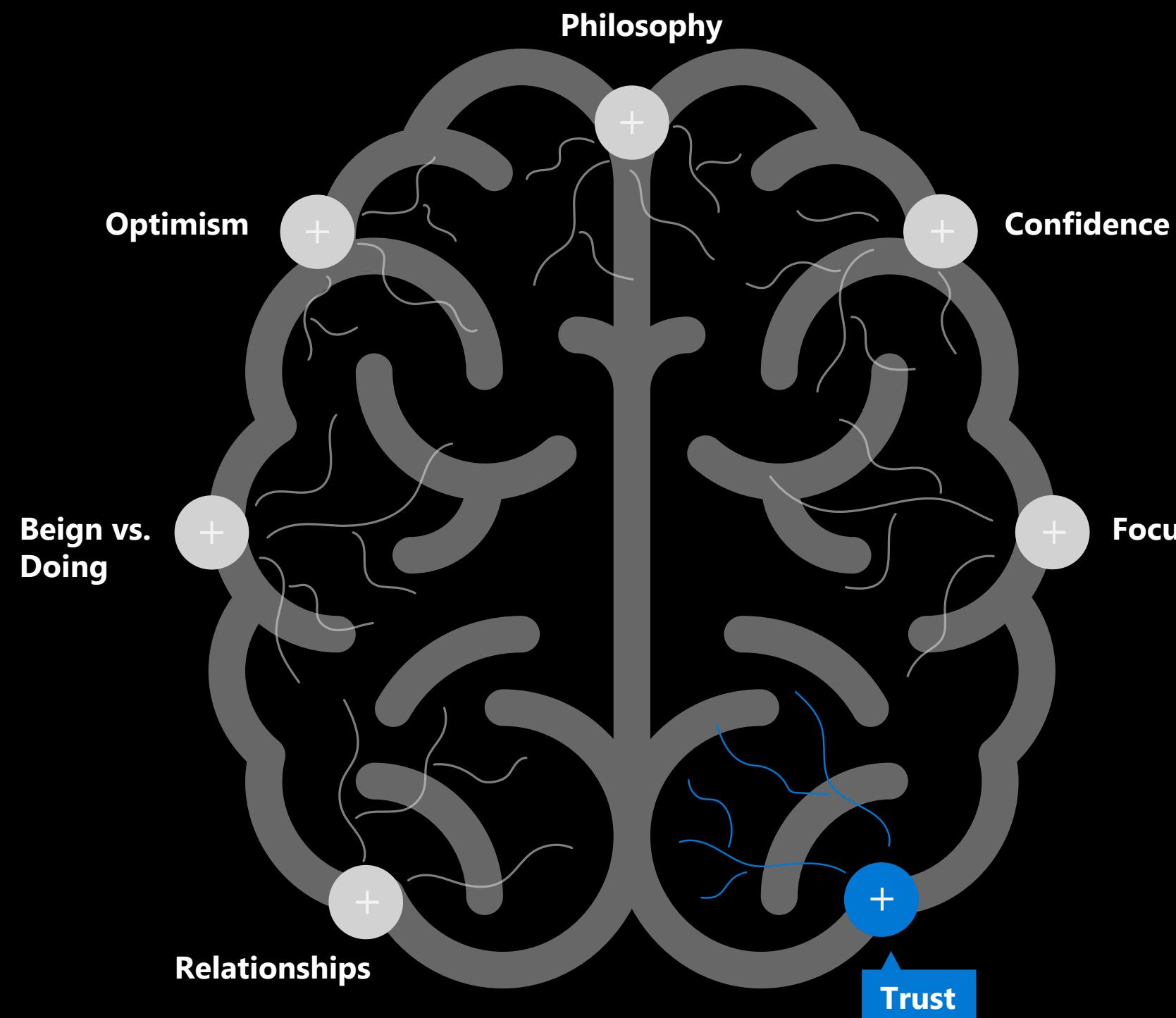
Most importantly, deep focus often precedes the "flow state"¹¹ that generates maximum creativity and productivity.

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4. Trusting oneself and others

A strong trust in oneself can be a cornerstone for high performance, and research shows that it facilitates peak performance by making processes more automatic.¹²

In the workplace, organizational trust and psychological empowerment significantly predict work performance.¹³ Trust among team members can also greatly enhance group participation and contribution, retention rates, and willingness to disseminate information freely.¹⁴

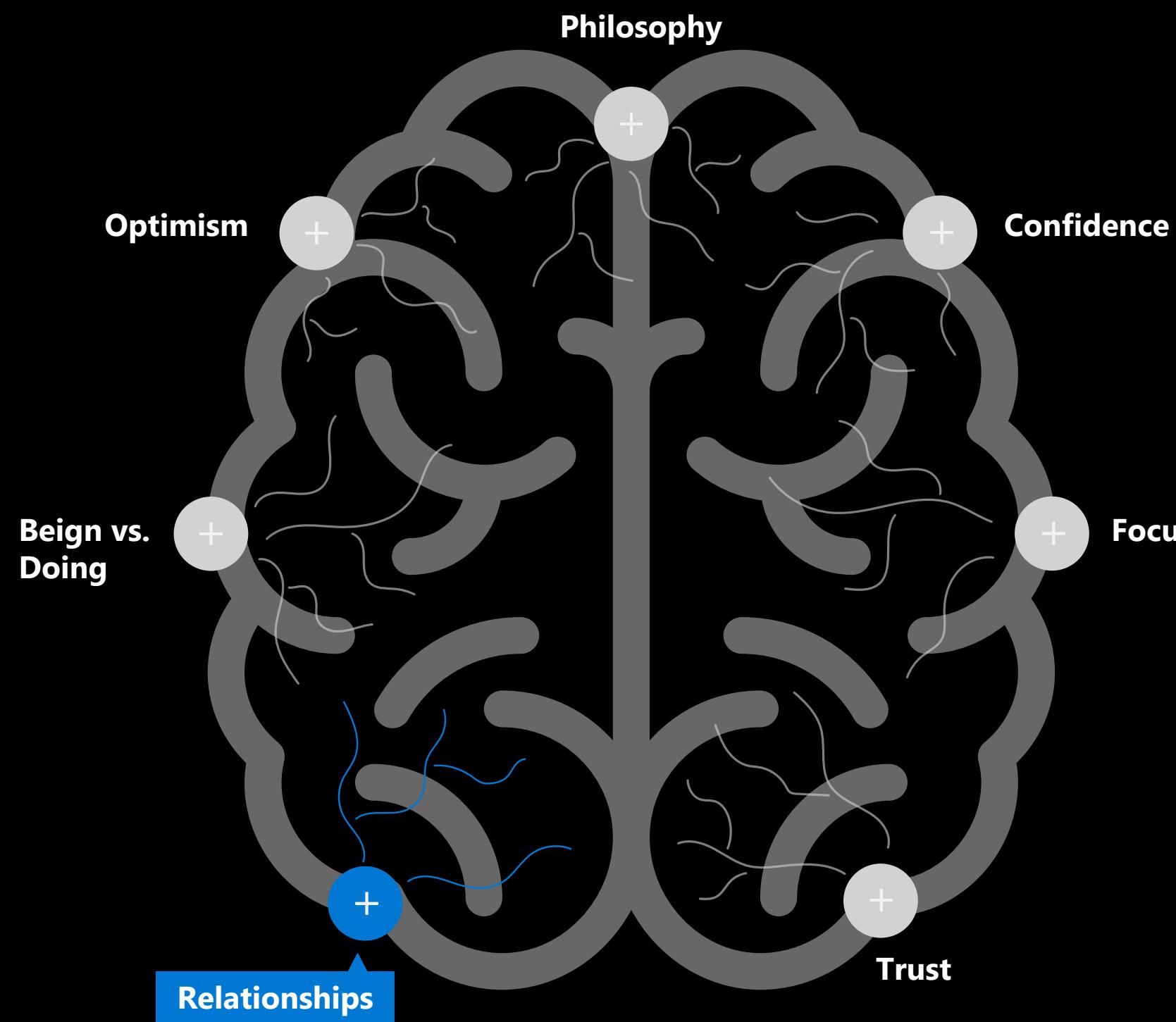
A strong trusting culture can even affect the bottom line, increasing net income 765 % over 10 years, according to a Harvard study of more than 200 companies.¹⁵

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5. “Front-loading” relationships

Knowing your personal philosophy is important, but it's also important to deeply know and trust the people you work with who are facing the same or similar challenges.

When you do the hard work of forging strong relationships and preparing your team with a set of principles, that's called front-loading—and it gives your team strength in the face of adversity.

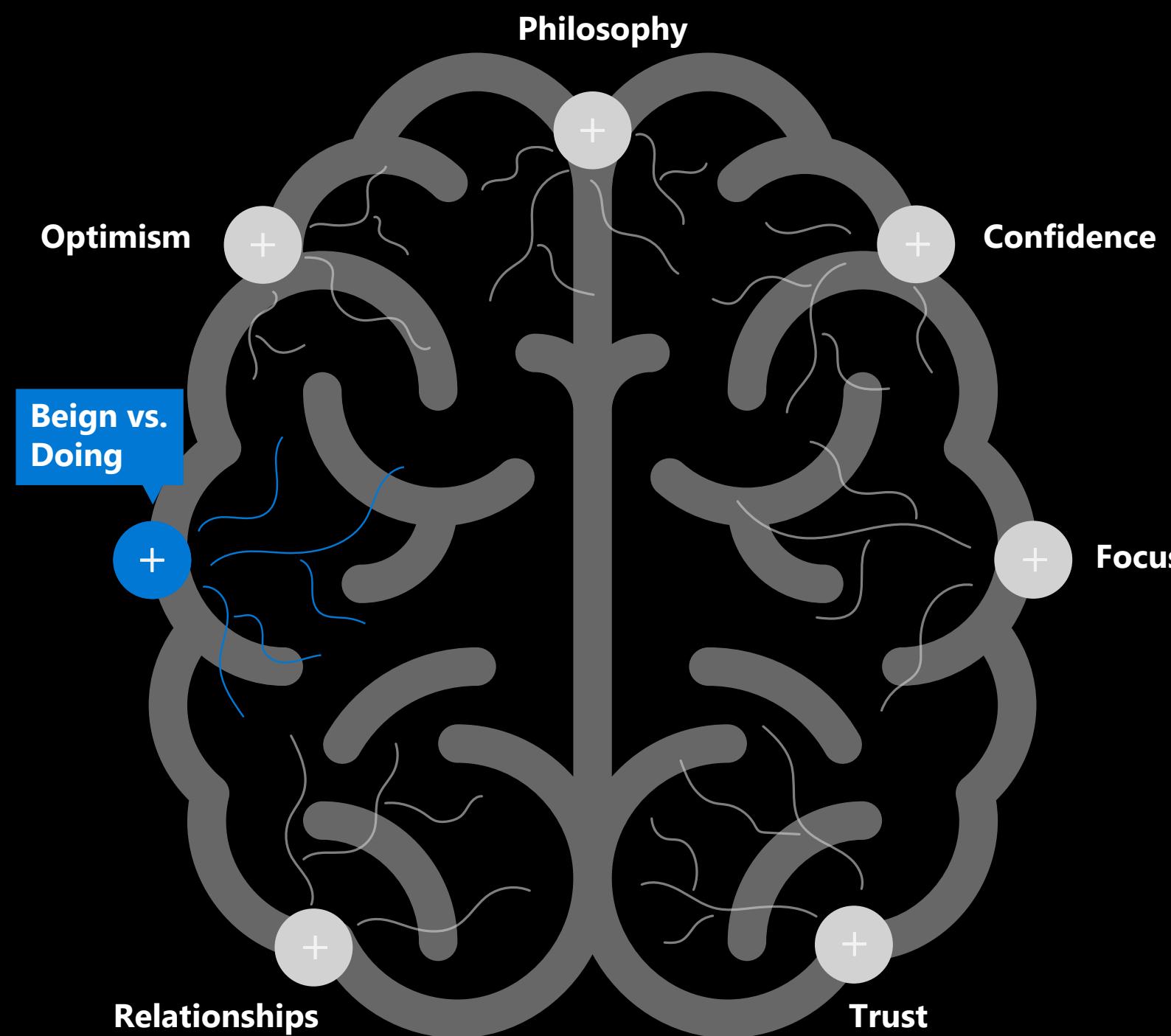
This kind of mindful leadership has been shown to positively influence employee well-being and performance.¹⁶ Positive relationships with co-workers are also 4x more likely to predict success than power or knowledge.¹⁷

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6. Focusing on *being* our best, not *doing* our best

If you always find yourself trying to "do more" and "do better," challenge yourself to flip that model on its head. "Be more and let the *doing* flow from there," says Gervais. "Be more grounded, present, authentic, and connected."

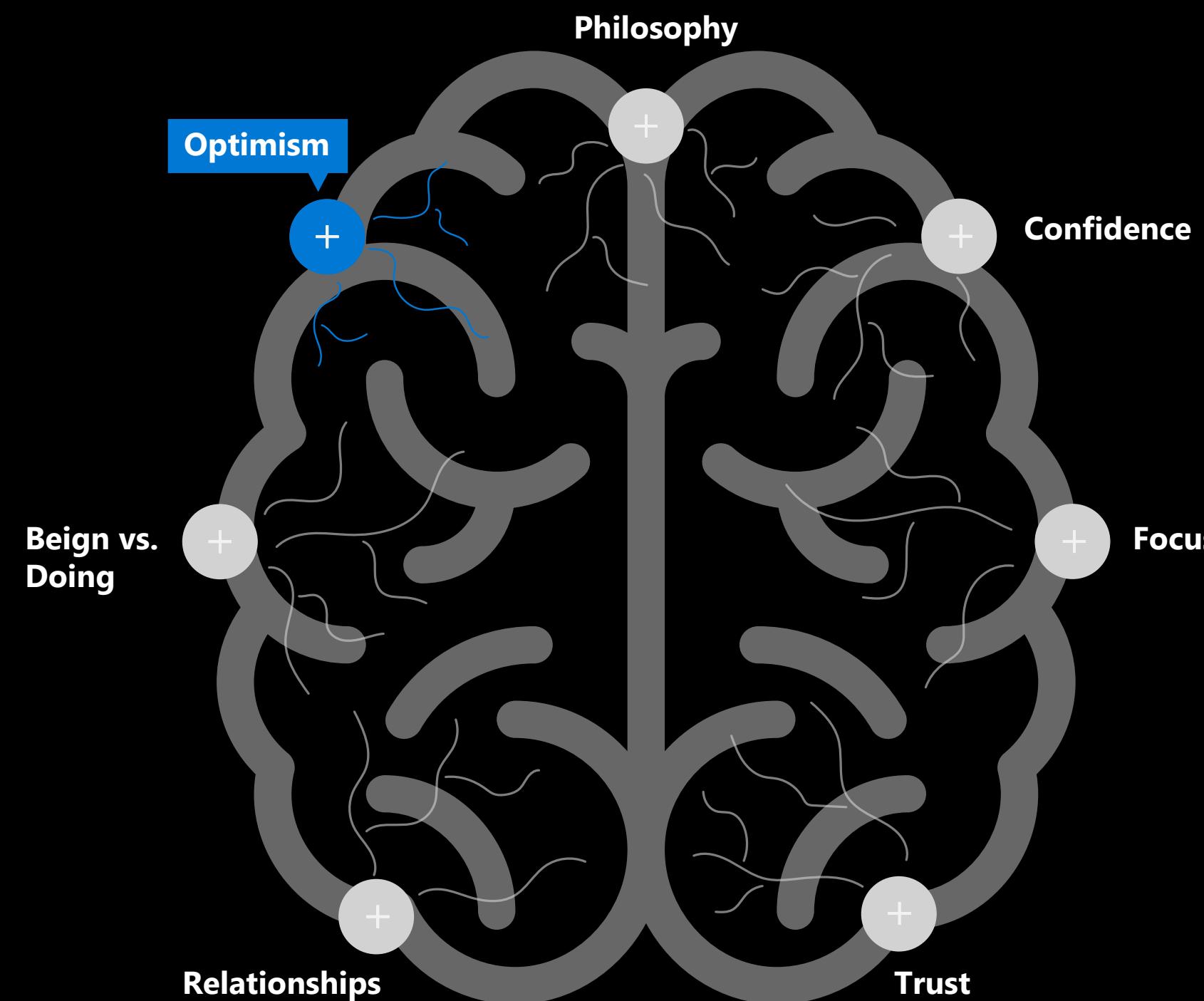
The self-awareness behind being our best—not doing our best—enhances insights¹⁸ as well as quality of life,¹⁹ and it also keeps our emotional resources from getting depleted.²⁰

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7. Cultivating optimism

While some people might reflexively think of optimism as "soft," research has found that it's actually at the center of mental toughness and resilience.²¹

Met Life and Dr. Martin Seligman, the foremost researcher of optimism, designed a collaborative study to test the effect of optimism on performance. Sales reps who scored high on the optimism test but failed Met Life's career aptitude test outperformed those who passed the aptitude test by 57% over two years.²²

"Optimism is a skill, which means it can be trained," says Gervais. "We're not born optimistic or pessimistic." Optimism fosters value-based decision-making,²³ and it's also linked to enhanced motivation.²⁴

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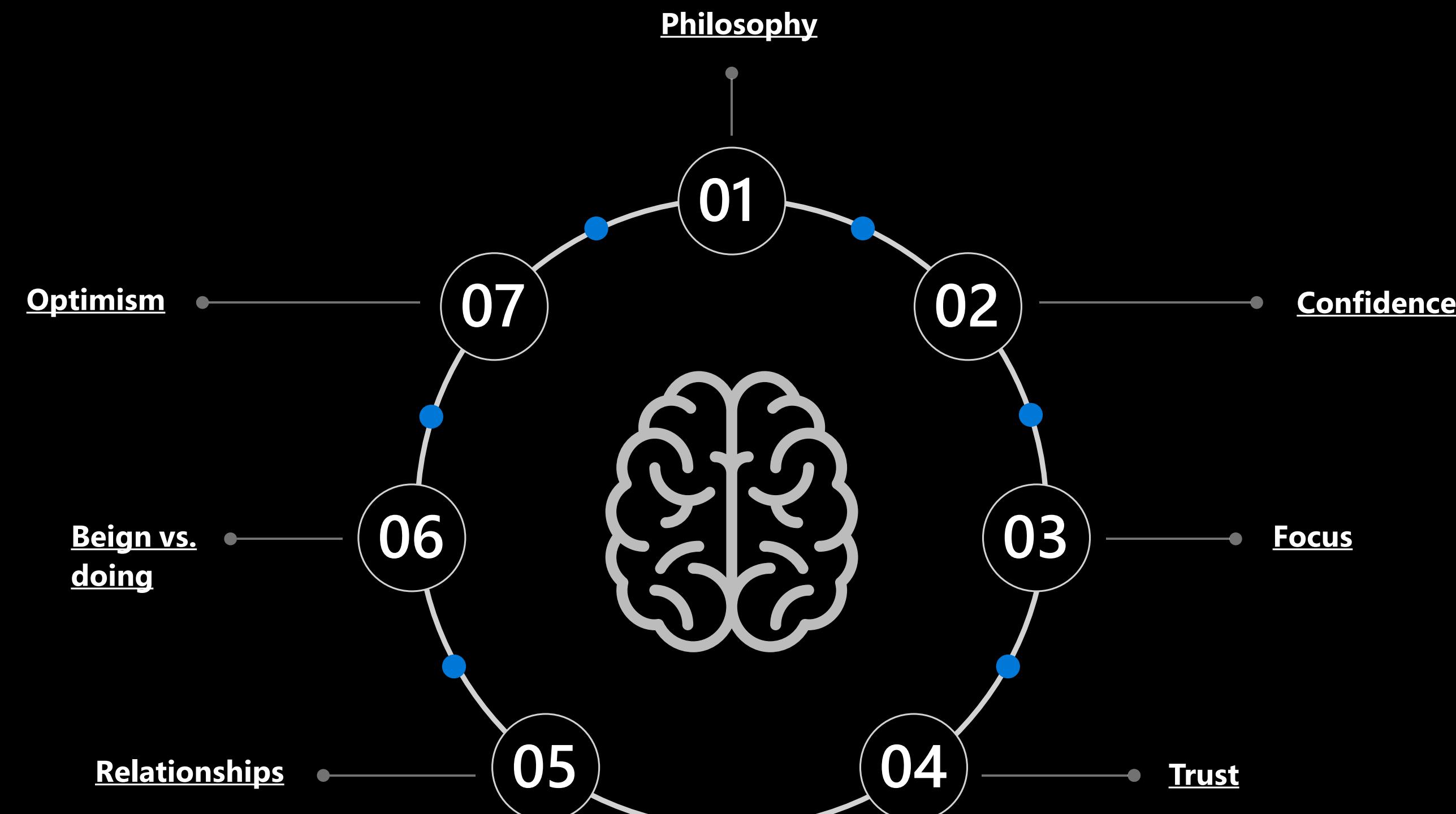
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Choose skills below for exercises to improve your performance



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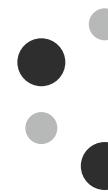
 **Knowing your personal philosophy**

- 1) In 25 words or less, who are you?
- 2) What are the principles that guide your thoughts, words, and actions?

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Generating calm and confidence

- 1) Focus your awareness on your self-talk.
- 2) Spend some time reflecting and write down:
 - a. The productive statements that help you generate confidence, and
 - b. Next to each statement, write three things you've done in your past that bring credibility to each statement. In other words, the things that give you reason to believe your self-talk.

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Maintaining deep focus in the moment

- 1) Set a clear goal for what you are doing
- 2) Challenge yourself just beyond your comfort zone
- 3) Focus on the things that are 100% in your capacity to control
- 4) Limit distractions



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Trusting oneself and others

- 1) Follow the words of the insightful Eleanor Roosevelt: "Do one thing every day that scares you." Purposefully get uncomfortable each day to expand your capacity to trust yourself.

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“Front-loading” relationships

- 1) Ask others for their personal philosophy.
- 2) Work to understand what motivates others, what drives them, and where they find purpose and meaning.

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Focusing on being our best, not doing our best

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- 1) Share your personal philosophy with a loved one, colleague, or friend. Practice:
 - a. Saying how you want to show up in times of test, and
 - b. Being open to feedback from trusted individuals. We all need others to help us learn and grow when things aren't quite right.
- 2) Practice being present, more often. Take one deep breath and connect to the sensation of your breath in your belly each time you feel tested or challenged.

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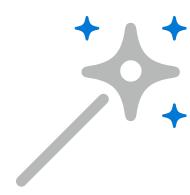
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Cultivating optimism

- 1) At the end of each day for the next 30 days, write down three good things that you experienced or witnessed that filled you with gratitude. In parentheses next to each item, write down the cause, e.g., kindness.

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Learn more about high-performance teams

Watch this interview with Dr. Michael Gervais to hear more observations and practical guidance on how high-performance psychology can make a difference in your teams.



Watch now

¹Imperative, The Purpose Economy

²Wrzesniewski, A. (2003). Finding positive meaning in work. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive Organizational Scholarship*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

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⁵The American Institute of Stress

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⁹Jones, G. (2002). What is this thing called mental toughness? An investigation of elite sport performers. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14(3), 205-218.

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¹¹Manzano, O., Theorell, T., Harmat, L., Ullen, F. (2010). The psychophysiology of flow during piano playing. *Emotion*, 10(3), 201-311.

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¹⁴Germain, M. (2011). Developing trust in virtual teams. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 24(3), 29-54.

¹⁵Dan Coyle, *Culture Code*

¹⁶Reb, J., Narayanan, J., & Chaturvedi, S. (2014). Leading mindfully: Two studies on the influence of supervisor trait mindfulness on employee well-being and performance. *Mindfulness*, 5, 36-45.

¹⁷Kim S. Cameron, *Practicing Positive Leadership*

¹⁸Hayes, J.A., Gelso, C.J., Van Wagoner, S.L., & Diemer, R.A. (1991). Managing counter-transference: What the experts think. *Psychological Reports*, 69, 139-148.

¹⁹Brown, K.W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4), 822-848.

²⁰Carlson, L., & Garland, S. N. (2005). Impact of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) on sleep, mood, wantstress, and fatigue symptoms in cancer outpatients. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 12(4), 278-285.

²¹Smith, B. W., Tooley, E. M., Christopher, P. J., & Kay, V. S. (2010). Resilience as the ability to bounce back from stress: A neglected personal resource? *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5(3), 166-176.

²²Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism*

²³Armor, D. A., & Taylor, S. E. (1998). Situated optimism: Specific outcome expectancies and self-regulation. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 30, 309-379.

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