



by Christopher Williams

“The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control. Where then do I look for good and evil? Not to uncontrollable externals, but within myself to the choices that are my own”

Readers have likely heard a form of this quote at some point in their careers - be it a podcast or article on leadership, a book on living well, or from a leader in an organization of which they were a part. Though a simple message, many of us fall short in aspiring to this 'chief task,' as presented so eloquently by [Epictetus](#).

Back to the Future

How often do we leave a role or find ourselves many moons into a new position, only to wish

we had known then what we know now?

I imagine many readers can empathize with this sentiment. I count myself among those who wish they could go back in time to [inform themselves](#) of all the headaches and stress that might be prevented...

A Predictable Life

This past year, I moved my family across an ocean during a pandemic to start a new career. Shortly thereafter, I found myself leading a small team of linguists for a non-combatant evacuation known as [Operation Allies Refuge](#) resulting from a past life as an active duty linguist. Rounding out the year, the world witnessed Russian President Putin's decision to [attack](#) a sovereign, democratic Ukraine and her people. As an intelligence professional, this meant an unyielding demand from our Nation's leaders to monitor, gain insights from, and make sense of a war underway.

It likely goes without saying, this is not the stuff you find in the job description - as leaders, rarely are we given the step-by-step guide. But still, we meet the challenge.

If I could have a short conversation with the 'me' that showed up a little over a year ago, I would pass on Epictetus' advice. I would do my best to instill the sensibility in coming to terms with the reality that I cannot control the uncontrollable - and that is alright.

There is, however, something we can control.

The Choice

The world's often chaotic, confusing, and complex state of affairs is unlikely to be willed to submission by those things we 'wish' would be. Our human ability stops far short of changing what *has been* - much less what *will be*. In the present, we can look inward and find that we have our choices - those we can own.

My advice to leaders coming into new positions - there is a time to know when to come to grips with *what is*, and, as necessary (if not more), *what is not* under your control.

A leader must know when to give him or herself grace and take a breath. As a leader, you will find others look to you not only for advice and guidance but seemingly to change the world.

Understand what you can control. Control your choices. In doing so, you will find happiness.

Look within. There you will find solace.

Chris is an Air Force Veteran turned Air Force Civilian, a dabbling [writer of things](#), and a career Intelligence Professional focused on enabling and realizing innovation culture within National Security. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the United States Government, Department of Defense, or Department of the Air Force.

Editor's Note: In June, we asked our [From the Green Notebook](#) community a simple but profound question: What's the one thing you wish you would have known before you started your last assignment? This week, we are pleased to share the nuggets of wisdom leaders have learned with the hope that it doesn't have to be relearned by someone else the hard way.

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