

# THE CURSED CROWN

**CONFRONTING THE BRUTAL TRUTHS  
AND DILEMMAS OF LEADERSHIP**



THE EIGHTH MILE  
CONSULTING

# THE CURSED CROWN

Confronting the Brutal Truths and  
Dilemmas of Leadership

David Neal

Jonathan Clark

Evan Parker



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# WHO WANTS TO BE A LEADER?

## Leadership Sucks

It's thankless, grimy work that's often completely misunderstood. People will use you and everything you have. Then, they'll ask for more. Worse yet, they will do it subconsciously.

No silver bullet or self-help book can grant you the secret to perfect leadership (if any such thing exists). If anyone says otherwise, they're either deluded or trying to sell you something. The stark truth is that everyone is winging it, regardless of their experience levels. Even the most seasoned leader with decades of expertise still encounters daily decisions with no 'right' answers.

*Nothing comes to my desk that is perfectly solvable. Otherwise, someone else would have solved it. You can't be paralyzed by the fact that it might not work out.*

*- Former U.S. President, Barack Obama*

That's the elephant in the room. There are inevitable failures, coupled with unforeseen frictions, that attack a leader's self-worth and sense of purpose to the point where good people give up.

If you're looking for a pat on the back or a pair of rose-coloured glasses, you've chosen the wrong book. You won't find easy answers or five simple steps to overcome any challenge.

Becoming a leader may be like climbing a mountain, but you're not climbing Mount Olympus. Once at the top, don't expect to be worshipped like a god or be magically transformed into a faultless leader. And let's be honest, the mountain is steep, treacherous, and at each stage, your feet and hands are likely to slip and get cut to pieces on the sharp rocks.

Many leaders fail because they don't realise they are signing up for a battle. Leadership isn't about bragging rights or sitting back and letting others do the work for you. Picking up the mantle of leadership isn't something that should be done lightly. It's a worthy calling, but not for the faint of heart.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**



## David Neal



David's 14 years as an Army Officer in the Australian Army have been the crucible where his leadership skills were forged. David isn't just about leading teams; he's about creating and nurturing them, understanding each nuance, and turning potential into performance.

His experience in project and change management has enabled him to transition skills from military operations to the boardroom, crafting strategies that foster resilience, adaptability, and innovation.

David's impact extends beyond the military and corporate realms. He has been featured in Forbes magazine, developed a substantial following on LinkedIn, and has been recognized with awards like the Top 200 Global Leaders (Leaders Hum), LinkedIn Top 20 Voices Australia, and Top 50 Innovative Coaches by Global Leaders Today.

**Follow David on LinkedIn**



## Jonathan Clark



Jonathan's journey was woven through the rigorous disciplines of military and corporate leadership, particularly as an Infantry officer in the Australian Defence Force. These experiences have shaped him into an adept navigator of organisational turmoil.

Jonathan is not just a theorist; he's been in the trenches, leading digital projects post-military and consulting across various sectors. His forte lies in change management, leadership, human resource strategies, strategy development, and communication. His approach isn't about bombarding with high-level jargon; it's about simplifying complexity, making sense of chaos, and leading with empathy.

By prioritising effective communication and stakeholder engagement, Jonathan ensures that every project exceeds its strategic goals.

**Follow Jonathan on LinkedIn**





## Evan Parker



Evan has honed his leadership skills during his 18-year journey through the realms of military combat operations, corporate program, and project management with Ernst & Young (EY), and business acquisitions and management in Private Equity (PE) sectors.

His journey from the disciplined environments of the military to the dynamic landscapes of corporate and private equity sectors demonstrates his adaptability and commitment to excellence. Evan's leadership is not just about achieving targets; it's about creating an ecosystem where innovation excels.

Evan is a strategist and practitioner who understands the nitty-gritty of fostering company growth. His experience isn't just about leading from the front; it's about nurturing future leaders, building high-performance teams, and preparing them for impactful roles in business.

**Follow Evan on LinkedIn**





# **GOOD PEOPLE, HELPING GOOD PEOPLE**

The temptation for any author is to write a lengthy introduction to assert their relevance and competence to their audience. Frankly, this makes it more about them than it does the audience, and it isn't our style.

Let's just say that we have been fortunate enough to have run numerous leadership experiments in both the military (via combat operations) and corporate sectors, all of which saw us as the guinea pigs.

We got some things right. We got many things wrong. Eventually, patterns became evident.

**Our mantra at The Eighth Mile Consulting is:  
'Good people, helping good people'.**

This means practicing what we preach. We continue to live with a growth mindset and relentlessly seek new opportunities to foster a culture of resilience, accountability, and servant leadership.

'Good people, helping good people' is not a random mantra made for the walls of a corporate office and a t-shirt. It is a filtering mechanism and acknowledgment that there are, in fact, bad people. It also holds our team to account for We don't pull punches, nor do we dance away from critically analysing mistakes (mostly our own).

We aim to share our mistakes and embrace the discomfort they bring, in the hope that others can learn from these lessons without experiencing the pain firsthand. While pain can be an effective teacher, learning from other's experiences is a more sustainable and less painful way to gain wisdom in the long run.

Our hope isn't that you run away from leadership opportunities or think it isn't a worthwhile calling. We want you to move forward with your eyes open, seeing all the scrapes, scuffs, and scars that come with being a leader.

Leadership is an odyssey with depressing pitfalls and failures but also this elated feeling that can only be achieved when you are in the right place at the right time, doing the right thing with the right people.

It can also be a very lonely endeavour. We say this not to dissuade you from it but to manage your expectations and prepare you for the trials and tribulations ahead.

It is challenging and difficult but therein lies its value.

If it was easy, everybody could do it.



### The Eighth Mile Leadership Team

David Neal, Jonathan Clark, Debbie Bennett, Hannah Woods, Evan Parker



THE EIGHTH MILE  
CONSULTING

# PART ONE

## WHY LEADERSHIP SUCKS



# PART ONE – WHY LEADERSHIP SUCKS

Leadership is full of contradictions and challenges. Just when you think you have a handle on it, the situation changes and the environment punches you square in the solar plexus, ripping the wind out of your lungs and leaving you wondering what is next. Good. It just taught us another valuable lesson, expect the unexpected.

In 2017, Jonathan and I (David) made the jump from the Army's infantry corps into the corporate world. It would see us leaving our roles as operations officers directly coordinating combat and humanitarian operations around the world. We jumped into the sphere of multimillion-dollar enterprise-level software projects in support of the aged care and not-for-profit sectors.

The jump was confusing, to say the least.

The culture we had come from, to the one we had arrived at, was like chalk and cheese.

What constituted a leader was entirely different. Assumptions about expected norms were immediately challenged. For better or worse, the organisation we had entered was in a state of flux. Financial catastrophes coupled with vague strategic direction ensured that leaders had their work cut out for them. But what became obvious was the extent to which certain managers responded to the crises.

For the first time, we saw managers (careful not to use the term 'leaders' in this context) deliberately or inadvertently increasing tension and drama.

We were shocked to hear our CEO pride himself on a 46% attrition rate as if it were a badge of honour, rationalising in some way that he was forcing the bad ones to leave. In reality, the people who were unemployable elsewhere were opting to stay, not the other way around. Moreover, some of their behaviours morphed into self-protectionism, as [backstabbing](#) and white anting became common practices.

To say we got caught out is an understatement. We moved from an organisation that provided income stability to one with significant uncertainty that prompted an array of human behaviours that we had not yet witnessed en masse.

In the first instance, we made the cardinal mistake of many a transitioning veteran and assumed that what we had come from was vastly better. But hindsight would affirm that it was not better, it was different.

Some days would see us (over a self-medicating whiskey) reflecting on the disorganised chaos and romanticising the days of old. Reflecting on incredible leaders we had been fortunate to work alongside and juxtaposing them against those we were engaging with presently. It was a ridiculous and unreasonable thing to do.



Military leaders had been fortunate enough to partake in a culture and ethos that had existed in practice for hundreds of years. An organisation that literally invested millions of dollars of training into each leader to ensure optimal performance. A team that has had tens of generations to solidify its values and ethos.

How convenient for us that we would make wide-reaching assertions about leaders doing the best they could with very minimal resources and investment, and what seemed at first glance like a lack of positive demonstration in which to exemplify.

Years later, the rose-coloured goggles lost some of their distortionary effects. It would demonstrate that both sucked in their own way.

## A Comparison

Leadership is a relentless journey into the heart of chaos. It is a dark and unforgiving path that exposes the worst aspects of human nature. It's a world where logic often takes a back seat, accountability is elusive, and self-preservation often trumps doing what's right.

Whether in the military or the corporate world, leadership is a never-ending battle that leaves you questioning why anyone would willingly choose this path. It's a paradox, chosen by the brave and the foolish, who endure the chaos in pursuit of a higher purpose, no matter how elusive it may be.

## Corporate Leadership

1. Silos and cliques manifesting in finger-pointing and blame gaming.

2. Political correctness prevents authentic dialogue about overtly known problems.

3. Offence culture resulting in censorship geared towards conformity.

4. Leader virtue signaling in an attempt to be seen doing the right thing to acquire a perceived moral high ground.

5. Weaponising Human Resources as a means of cutting down tall poppies.

6 An incessant need to be liked over making the right choices.

7. An unwillingness to accept personal accountability, hiding behind 'collaborative' group decisions.

8. A willingness to accept poor behaviors over ruffling feathers.

9. Redirecting money from important collective projects to individual back pockets.

10. Rationalising the gambling of staff salaries to make fractional improvements in profit for shareholders.

## Military Leadership

1. Aneurysm inducing bureaucracy and red tape.

2. Ego-centric leaders who would protect their own interests over the viability of the plan.

3. Entitlement mentality associated with a group of people who had all their basic needs met.

4. An obese officer relaying the expectations of soldiers regarding an upcoming physical. Prompting the sarcastic phrase 'double standards are better than no standards.'

5. Witch-hunting for who made the mistake over fixing the mistake itself.

6. Repeated failures due to pride and bravado.

7. Risk management is geared more towards ass-covering than genuinely managing the risks.

8. Rationalising people as icons on a map as opposed to people walking on the ground.

9. Leaders who forget their roots make the disconcerting jump towards being a politician more than a leader.

10. Cliques that prompt unresourceful competition at a time when genuine enemies existed.

## Chapter One - The Blind Leading the Blind

Don't you just hate that leader who always looks like they're killing it?

Cool, calm, collected. Unflappable in crisis and motivational during periods of mundane repetition. They ooze confidence and certainty.

We used to talk about it in the early days of the Royal Military College during our Army leadership training. We would jealously sit and stare at the highly competent officers, our instructors, endlessly noting their styles and approaches. It seemed impossible and daunting to develop our skills to a point where we could be like them. They were idolised and placed atop a romanticised pedestal.

As years progressed, stories would emerge about their faults and misdemeanours. Their personal errors of judgment would become well-known anecdotes that would be discussed in various circles throughout the Army.

It would inevitably serve to fracture the idealised and unrealistic images we had fabricated during our younger years in training. There's an old saying, 'never meet your heroes.' Well, if the Army taught us anything, it was never to get drunk with your heroes.

Over time we adopted various leadership roles in our capacity as officers. Our soldiers would expect the utmost in standards across all aspects of military existence.

Fitness, education, morality, technical ability, loyalty, influence, and likeability would all serve as filters by which to be judged.

The ever-watching eyes of the assessing cohort of soldiers (and other officers) were relentless.

As time went by it became evident to us.

**Everybody is winging it, but some people just have a better poker face.**

Since launching The Eighth Mile Consulting we have conducted thousands of hours of coaching with people from around the world across all conceivable industries.

One thing is certain. Every leader who is being honest with themselves is winging it.

In a 2022 study, the United Nations Development Programme found that six out of seven people worldwide were plagued by feelings of insecurity. Don't be fooled by people's duck-on-water façade. You are winging it, but so are they.

With the various evolutions of social media, we as a society have adopted unrealistic expectations of what constitutes reality. The social media feed is characterised by information people want to show you. It is the masks they choose to show. Few dare to authentically convey their true-life story, and even when some do it is from a self-serving angle of attention seeking. Don't let the fabricated game of masquerade trick you into thinking it is real.

Leaders are compelled to make deductions and decisions with limited information, most of the time.

To complicate things, most of our choices are based upon a series of options, all of which are trash, but each ranging in ‘crapness’ in their own unique ways.

The positive aspect is that at least we get to choose which crap option we pick. Most often the worst choice is not making a choice at all.

The crux of effective leadership lies not in pretending but in building a set of skills, experiences and, to a degree, ‘masks’ to enable us to function in different scenarios and situations.

You can’t predict when analysis paralysis will root you to the ground and hold you back from taking a step. You can, however, take that next step. There will be days when you feel like the blind leading the blind. There will be other days when you truly will be the blind leading the blind. Being a leader means continuing to take that next step and make decisions that will eventually lead up the mountain of positive change.

**It is about acknowledging the discomfort and being comfortable with it.**

## The Leader Has No Clothes

Assuming competence is a surefire way to get blindsided. Just because someone's in a position of power doesn't mean they have all the answers.

In one of Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairy tales, an Emperor is tricked, mostly because of his vanity, into paying two weavers to make him a set of clothing that is invisible to anyone stupid or incompetent. When the Emperor is given no suit at all, he pretends to put a suit on rather than admit that he can't see any clothing. He parades himself around the town without any clothing to avoid being considered a fool.

Don't assume a leader knows what they're doing just because they're at the top. Even the most competent leaders have blind spots. We often don't notice our own blind spots; leaders aren't any different. That's why it's crucial to understand how to manage up, whilst empathising with their situation. It's not about undermining authority or sowing seeds of doubt. It's about ensuring that the organisation isn't steered by a single, potentially flawed perspective.

In Andersen's tale, the reality check for the vain Emperor is a small child in the audience objectively calling out:

*The Emperor has no clothes! The Emperor has no clothes!*

Far better to have a dose of reality-checked objectivity than to parade around town naked.

## The Sea of Nodding Heads

You'd be surprised how many times we've sat in board meetings, surrounded by a sea of nodding heads, only to realise later that half the room didn't understand the topic or the strategy. This

phenomenon is called groupthink, and it can quickly drown out any critical analysis of ideas in a sea of nodding heads.

When U.S. President John F. Kennedy inherited the planned invasion of the Bay of Pigs from President Eisenhower, he accepted it and decided to move forward. He firmly believed that a rapid invasion of Cuba was the best course of action.

Some of his advisors had misgivings but didn't speak up. The operation took place and proved to be one of the most significant strategic blunders for the administration. It speaks to the serious consequences of groupthink in an organisation. We need to actively combat groupthink to give space for questions and critiques of ideas.

Fortunately, the military was characterised by highly structured mechanisms of planning. But many an officer would come unstuck by misconstruing the aim following countless hours of developing a plan. The problem arose when an officer who was pitching a concept to a superior would start with, 'Good morning, sir, here is MY plan.'

What would inevitably follow was a myriad of concerned looks and people shifting uncomfortably in their seats, knowing what was going to come next. The reason is - they had made the plan about them.

Any commander worth their salt would immediately pick up on it and correct it, 'It is not YOUR plan, it is THE plan.'

It was a subtle but important shift in perspective which in turn ensured the plan was postured for necessary criticism (and you can bet it was going to get smashed).



It ensured that the sponsor would not let their pride get in the way of refining the plan due to an over-attachment to it. The net result was a more robust plan, and lives would be saved. Groupthink itself was the enemy.

Never forget that many within the sea of nodding heads might just be trying to lay low. We need to find ways to have frank discussions and hear opposing viewpoints so that the plan gets smashed, not the roll-out delivery.

## Know Thy Enemy

Understanding your 'enemy' (and we use this term facetiously) is crucial.

*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.*

*- Sun Tzu, The Art of War*

Obviously, our superiors, peers, and subordinates aren't (or shouldn't be) our enemies in the traditional sense, but the analogy still provides some practical utility. It helps us conceptualise people for what they truly are, a hybrid.

On one hand, people are the rational, logical, and sensical beings we have cracked them up to be.

On the other, they are animalistic, emotive, and reactionary beings we have seen demonstrated throughout the worst aspects of human existence.

Robert McNamara, a certified genius and arguably one of the most influential leaders of the last century, reflected on his then-84 years of experience. Most notably, he reflected on his leadership journey through the most significant thirteen days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. A crisis that was a few minutes away from all-out nuclear war.

In retrospect, he drew two valuable lessons which he would detail in his resource 'The Fog of War':

*Rationality alone will not save us. Empathize with your enemy.*

Highly intelligent leadership teams on both ends of the crisis arrived at the conclusion that nuclear war, or at a minimum an invasion of Cuba, was the only viable option. Intelligence and aptitude were not enough to deter their convictions.

In the end, it was luck and some strong influence from lone leaders like Llewellyn E. "Tommy" Thompson Jr., who swayed the world away from complete disaster.

Intelligent people will do irrational things, and then rationalise them retrospectively. Knowing this helps us understand others. Reinforced by the potent cocktail combination of context drawn from listening with an intent to understand another's perspective and frame of reference. When we bother to empathise with our enemy, we also start to realise the extent to which we too are imperfect.

See, the weaknesses and strengths allow a deeper understanding of not only the person but the circumstances in which they find themselves. This understanding is critical to carving out pathways forward, managing difficult conversations, and building trust within a team. Humility, in this regard, goes a long way toward being relatable and worth following.

## Chapter Two - Lonely at The Top

Leadership, contrary to the glamorous façade often painted, is thankless work.

When we step into the shoes of a leader, we're saying goodbye to the days of constant praise and affirmation. Remember those days when every small effort was recognised? Kiss them goodbye.

*Leadership is lonely, and the more you care, the lonelier you will feel.*

– Robin Sharma

Becoming a leader can feel like an exhausting, thankless climb. Writer and mountaineer, Jon Krakauer, after making the incredibly exhausting climb for himself, said,

*“Standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn’t summon the energy to care”.*

He was too drained to feel anything at all. If we, as leaders, lack the drive or capacity to care, it's unrealistic to anticipate motivation or concern arising from others. Leadership requires a constant commitment that cannot be compensated for solely or wholly by the team.

If you can't summon the energy to care about leadership, don't expect it to come from those around you.

It is no coincidence that philosophers, and later psychologists and neuroscientists, have landed on similar conclusions anchored in the same understanding: Life is suffering.

How we choose to navigate the suffering and find meaning in the chaos determines to what extent we can find satisfaction.

Summoning the energy is a point of discussion. As is acknowledging and managing the discomfort of fatigue. The amateur leader might promote the idea of a 50/50 work/life balance. This focus will lead to an undoing of one, if not many, of the competing requirements within one's world. Leaders must focus their time, energy, and effort on the priority. This necessitates a constant shift of resources to what requires it.

An example can be found in the new executive. While setting and maintaining boundaries is important, there is an understanding that more energy will be devoted to the first 90 days of 'getting the feet under the desk' than potentially within home life. This may not be the case for every executive, but it is a common norm. If we value those 90 days as a priority, then something must be devalued as a balance.

Likewise, if someone in our family gets cancer or has a significant medical condition then our resources and focus will shift and change to suit the need. It is the contradiction of leadership whereby setting a stringent quota on your 'work/life' balance is a recipe for disaster.

It leaves much to be desired in the world of adaptability, flexibility, and accommodating a dynamic environment.

Having a goal or aim to focus more on family or work is a good thing but we must also be realistic.

This is why leadership is lonely. Because it's hard work, and people have a unique ability to disappear when hard work starts.

This is particularly true when coupled with social judgment and criticism. Let's be honest; the great majority will not look at the same priorities or timeframe.

Having a longer-term focus or being resilient to peer pressure in the face of constant adversity can be challenging. It is also extremely isolating.

Nothing is cool until someone has been doing it long enough. Most people are merely copying another trend or someone else's progress. Rare is the path less travelled and rarer still is that road successful.

## You're Not the Main Character in Their Story

People, by nature, are self-referenced creatures. It is more natural to see others through a frame of how others affect us personally than it is to perceive how we are observed by others intuitively. The majority of people are so obsessed with their personal stories, dilemmas, and ambitions that they rarely lift their gaze to notice the subtleties of someone else's journey, especially a leader's.

We are, at best, a fleeting cameo in the saga of the people around us. An incidental character who made a brief appearance but wasn't the hero they rooted for. As a leader, this can be soul-crushing, especially when we've poured countless hours into our work. Countless hours go unnoticed because people aren't looking out for them.

My father once said to me (Dave),

*“Don’t flatter yourself, they aren’t wasting any time thinking about you.”*

This was after I had been caught up in a self-referenced rant following somebody's critique of a presentation.

If this thought isn't a shock to you, then you're productively practicing what psychologists call the “theory of mind”. You understand that everyone is seeing their life and work through their perspective, weaving their narratives, and following their desires. For the more astute leaders, this provides an opportunity.

Knowing that people are largely self-referenced (including ourselves) allows us to adjust our approach to match and mirror our audiences.

It also allows a certain power in relative anonymity. This freedom to move around and make mistakes, or even learn from them, is akin to lifting a heavy burden off your shoulders. It is further aided by the knowledge that your actions are not the prime subject in absolutely everyone's brains. Some may be upset, offended, or downtrodden by

this acknowledgment. Choose to see opportunity, if only for your own sanity.

It is commonly cited by reputable establishments like Harvard, Forbes, and McKinsey, that most change initiatives fail. In our experience, this is most commonly attributed to one routinely overlooked aspect: fear.

People are inherently scared creatures. Large-scale change initiatives can rapidly threaten one's relevance or measures of competence within their environment.

A change in software platform might seem like a great 'opportunity for efficiencies' at the strategic level. But, when it is perceived through a lens of fear, and modelled to the uncertainties experienced at the tactical level, it is a threat. A threat that might jeopardise one's ability to provide for their family or feel valued.

Do not be surprised when people find overt/covert or deliberate/inadvertent mechanisms to sabotage the initiative.

In the absence of context, people will rationalise their own. Odds are it will err on the side of caution, and people will shift towards self-protectionism. Accepting this as truth allows us to adapt our language towards addressing the personal fears that would otherwise trigger a fight, flight, or freeze response, thus allowing them to remain comprehensive with their faculties.



Never underestimate the power a fear, most notably uncertainty, can have on a person's ability to resist change. An extension to the notion of fear as an obstruction is how many a leader has been reduced to tears by their initial 'rational' analysis of obstruction only to realise that rationality often has no place in this game. The emerging fear is an almost limitless fuel source.

When coupled with an understanding of organisational complexities, it can trigger a guerrilla warfare campaign of subterfuge, resistance, and a long list of barely noticeable 'accidents' or hold-ups which work to derail even the most committed change leader.

Their story is about them, not you. And you can't blame them for that. It may be lonely on the top, but remember that it can also be lonely in the middle, bottom, and everywhere in between.

## Spotlight Syndrome

It's easy to imagine the loneliness that accompanies leadership with this analogy:

Picture standing in the spotlight of a colossal stadium. Thousands upon thousands of eyes are upon you, scrutinising every move.

While the sheer magnitude of attention might seem flattering in the first instance, it's also incredibly isolating. The immense number of the masses watching doesn't equate to understanding or companionship. They're likely forming judgments, critiques, and whispering behind hands. The bright lights shield them from your view, making their reactions, emotions, and feedback imperceptible. Anonymity for them, vulnerability for you. It's a stark image, and it's known as the spotlight effect.

In 2000, a team of researchers gathered a group of students and asked one of them to wear an embarrassing T-shirt. After the students were asked to complete an unrelated task, the student with the unfortunate apparel was asked how many people noticed that they were the person in the shirt. Only 25% were able to remember who wore it.

Only one in four in that group bothered to remember who was embarrassed in the group. While the student felt like the spotlight was on them, pointing right at a less-than-flattering shirt, most of the group hardly noticed.

This principle can be applied to leadership.

You may have a spotlight of dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of eyes on you. You may make an embarrassing mistake.

You may never know how your team truly feels about the incident, but you can take some solace in knowing that they are unlikely to be spending the night awake dwelling on the event, to the extent you are.

## Climbing The Ladder One Step at A Time

While everyone's quick to critique the person in charge, few are willing to trade places.

The blue-collar to white-collar transition is illustrative of this. Many view ascending the corporate ladder as a betrayal — abandoning peers and becoming "one of them". But here's the irony: if no one dares to move up, our corporate structures become hollow shells, devoid of realistic, ground-level insights.

Consider the blueprint of a bridge. Engineers can draft impeccable designs. Every curve is mathematically precise, and every support is calculated to bear weight efficiently.

However, without the expertise of those who are familiar with the literal nuts and bolts — the construction workers, the material suppliers, and the maintenance crew — those plans might remain abstract and could potentially falter when faced with real-world challenges.

Take, for instance, the choice of materials. An engineer might design a bridge with a particular type of metal in mind, chosen for its strength and longevity as deduced from laboratory tests. However, someone with hands-on experience might know that, while this metal is theoretically optimal, it has a tendency to corrode faster in certain climates or when exposed to specific environmental factors, like saltwater in coastal regions.

Without this practical insight, the bridge, although beautifully designed, might face premature wear and tear, leading to costly repairs and potential safety hazards.

The consequences are dire when capable individuals refuse the challenge of leadership, choosing instead the familiarity of their current roles, all while complaining about 'management.'

It's even more ironic when these individuals claim, "I could have done better". Where, then, was their initiative and leadership example? Don't hold your breath for too long, lest you slowly fade out to the sound of crickets.

The truth is, we as leaders choose to uncomfortably progress up the chain into uncertain settings, to ensure that we can represent those we respect below.

If you don't do it, who will? Nobody.

If you are looking around for the leader and cannot see one, it's you.

## Man In the Arena

Theodore Roosevelt knew the difficulty of being the man in the arena. While it's easy to sit back and judge, it's a very different thing to be the one steering the ship. Many leaders can easily understand the way he describes being the one willing to dare greatly:

*It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.*

Leadership isn't about comfort. It's about braving the unknown, making the hard decisions, and dare it be said, sometimes being the villain in someone else's story. If your intent is to truly champion your team and organisation, brace yourself for the cold truth: sometimes, the very people you're fighting for will ostracise you, criticise you, or just forget about you.

It's a paradox, one of the many in the convoluted narrative of leadership.

Some of the greatest dangers of climbing Mount Everest are falling ice, hypothermia, severe exhaustion, and lack of oxygen. The gruelling ascent becomes impossible without the proper gear and preparation.

Jon Krakauer, the climber we referenced at the beginning of this chapter, calls the climb his “biggest mistake”. Can you overcome the challenges of climbing the metaphorical mountain of leadership? If you do, remember to take a moment to enjoy the breathtaking view.

## Chapter Three - A Convenient Punching Bag

One of the most idealised notions about leadership is the camaraderie, the vision of a team rallying around their leader, sharing burdens shoulder-to-shoulder. But the gritty reality is different: leadership is often a solitary journey, especially when the storm hits - and it will hit. Don't expect people to help you take the impact; in fact, be prepared to absorb that hit alone, at least in the first few instances.

At the heart of true leadership lies risk. It's an inescapable component of any opportunity.

Leaders step up to the plate, not just to guide their teams to sunnier shores but to shield them from the tempests along the way. They proactively choose to absorb risks on behalf of their teams. Why? Not just out of a sense of responsibility but because bearing risk is also a means of amplifying their influence.

When leaders take on challenges and potential failures for their teams, it showcases their commitment and builds trust. However, this act of valour doesn't come without its scars.

In our capacity as individual executive coaches, we have met many leaders who have nobly subscribed to servant leadership. Good on them. It would be hypocritical for us to condemn servant leadership as our team usually walks around with 'leadership is not about you' inscribed on the back of our shirts. But there is a catch.

Nothing is without its price. The very same leaders who were quick to drink the Kool-Aid on servant leadership are most often the ones who drift over to ‘the dark side.’ Serving the team is what often feels like a one-way investment.

The novelty of doing favour after favour, coupled with people’s willingness to accept freebies, results in the gradual buildup of resentment strong enough to fracture the will of some of the best-intentioned leaders. Worse yet, they don’t often realise that the transition has happened to them.

*Inside every cynical person there is a disappointed idealist*

*- George Carlin*

We must enter the game with eyes wide open. People will take advantage of you as a leader. It comes with the territory. Don’t make the fatal mistake of assuming one person’s poor choices is reflective of everyone else. There are good people out there who would draw great benefit and inspiration from what you have to provide, but you’ve got to take the good with the bad.

## Who Wears the Risk

Imagine a scenario where a leader spearheads a new venture - a project filled with potential but riddled with uncertainties. They jump in headfirst, foreseeing the benefits it could bring to the team and the broader organisation. But if this venture capsizes, who bears the brunt? The leader.



While the fallout might affect the team's morale or even their trust in leadership, it's the leader who faces the most significant blowback, be it in terms of reputation, credibility, or even personal self-worth.

Here's the harsh truth: in moments of downfall or when bearing the consequences of these risks, leaders often stand alone. As the embers of challenges and failures continue to glow hot, it's mostly the leader who holds them, feeling the heat long after the fire has been put out. We shouldn't expect the team to grab a handful of these burning remnants. Nor should we wait for soothing words or gestures.

The team, engrossed in their individual roles and often shielded from the magnitude of the risk, might not even fully grasp the depth of the wounds inflicted.

Just as a shield wall in battle protects those behind it, a leader takes on the primary impact of external challenges. This can include making difficult decisions, dealing with crises, or navigating complex negotiations. By doing so, we shield our team from the direct impact of these challenges, allowing them to focus on their specific roles without the added pressure of overarching threats.

It sounds bleak, doesn't it? But it's not a cry for pity; it's just contextualising a core truth. Every time a leader steps forward to make a tough call or ventures into uncharted territory, they are essentially saying, "I've got this, so you don't have to (at least in the first instance)". They are putting themselves in the line of fire, not out of a thirst for heroics but from a genuine desire to elevate their team and organisation.

So, what is in it for the leader? The answer: Influence.

People's influence is normally commensurate with the ability of risk they are willing to burden. The owner of a business holds a personal risk to their finance and reputation if the endeavour fails, but they also have more decision-making powers (authority). The person voluntarily taking on more responsibilities ultimately finds themselves in a position where they have more input over the outcome (influence). Risk is a highly effective social mechanism for determining who will later hold the sway over the outcome.

This is not to say there won't be a large representation of people watching from the peanut gallery, with opinions about how it could have been done better. These people comprise the base elements of any environment, they will be there regardless of how well or poorly you are doing. We acknowledge their existence and then move forward accepting risk anyway...

### Expect Success, Plan for Failure

So, what's the takeaway for aspiring leaders? Go into leadership with eyes wide open. Understand that leadership is not just about basking in the glory of successes but also about standing resiliently in the face of failures, often alone. While the weight of risk and responsibility can be heavy, it's also the crucible where true leadership is forged.

Nothing worth gaining comes without risk. The very definition of risk means that there are going to be moments when you fail, or worse yet your decisions negatively affect others.

Even more frustratingly for leaders, team members may be the ones who fail, but we must take ownership of their mistakes and shortcomings.

We can't always avoid failure. Ask any successful leader and, if they're willing to share, you'll find many scars from failures. Or times when the blame shifted onto them and moments when they had to be the metaphorical punching bag for failure.

## Learn From Punches

You'll likely take the hits for your failures or your team's failures. This may be a reality, but it's not a defeatist statement. Leadership means preparing for the punches and building resilience. Listen to some of the blame and feedback coming your way, because there may be learning moments amid the ashes of failure.

*The secret to life, though, is to fall seven times and to get up eight times.*

*- Author, Paulo Coelho*

Being a leader may mean being a punching bag once in a while, but it also means stepping and continuing to move forward and innovate despite setbacks and wounds.

## Remember That Leaders Are Human

For those being led, it's a reminder to occasionally look up and acknowledge the sacrifices and risks your leaders take on. While you might not share the direct hit, understanding and empathising with their stance can make the journey a tad less lonely for them, and for you.

This is particularly true when we dare to bite our ego and 'manage up.' In doing so, thinking about the frictions our leaders are experiencing and instead of adding to them, positioning ourselves as part of the solution. Only then should we morally feel like we deserve more resources, time, and energy. Bring something of value to the party, before stating your demands.

## Chapter Four - Why Bother?

*He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.*

*– Friedrich Nietzsche*

To paraphrase Nietzsche, if you have a “why”, or overarching reason to lead, then you can overcome any “how”, or nitty-gritty obstacles you may face. Stop and consider why you want to lead or why you’re still leading.

Then, you can find the motivation and purpose you need to figure out how to take the next step.

We have always found strength in knowing what we were supporting was bigger than ourselves. It links with our legacies of how we might be objectively remembered by people whose opinions we genuinely care about.

### How To Find Yourself

Focusing on serving others can be a powerful way to find yourself and your purpose. It can be a refreshing way for us to shift our focus and reset our expectations. Let’s be honest, some of the richest people in the world are also some of the most unhappy. The reason is that we people have an intuitive ability to know when we are, or are not, providing value.

We are communally evolved creatures, and we have an innate understanding when what we are doing is more broadly serving something bigger than ourselves.

*The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.*

*– Mahatma Gandhi*

It is no coincidence Mahatma landed on this conclusion.

And it is worth seriously considering at a time when our younger generations, fuelled by self-referenced social media influencers and nihilistic snapshots about the future of the (their) world, continue to have ever-increasing rates of depression and accompanying medications. The amount to which we believe things are centred around us is proportionate to the weight of the burden we feel about our future.

But what does it truly mean to "lose yourself" in the service of others? And, more importantly, how does it intertwine with the modern concepts of leadership and value?

In the realm of leadership, there's an intriguing paradox: true leaders often find their purpose and identity in the very roles and responsibilities that many shun.

These aren't always the glamorous tasks or the roles that come with accolades and applause. More often, they are the behind-the-scenes responsibilities. The jobs that require grit, resilience, and a relentless commitment to the collective good.

*The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.*

*– Ralph Waldo Emerson*

For many leaders, the “why” to lead is this very commitment. When you commit to improving the collective good, or becoming “good people, helping good people”, then you start to uncover the secrets of servant leadership.

## What Is Leadership Worth?

Economic principles teach us a fundamental truth about value. If you wish to halve the value of something, double its supply. Conversely, if you want to increase its worth, make it rare.

In a society where everyone clamours for the spotlight and the superficial markers of success, those willing to serve selflessly, who take on the unglamorous but essential tasks, become invaluable. Their rarity defines their significance.

Leaders who understand and embody this principle stand out, not because they seek attention but because they're engaged in work that many aren't willing to do.

By going the extra mile and taking on the responsibilities others aren't willing to, you're setting yourself apart as a leader.

You're showing your commitment to the cause and how much leadership is worth to you.

## Finding Purpose in Responsibility

As we navigate the currents of our modern world, we're confronted with a disconcerting reality. Many feel disenfranchised, adrift without a clear sense of purpose. At the heart of this condition is a societal shift towards extreme egocentricity. The narrative of the modern age, amplified by social media and pop culture, often emphasises rights over responsibilities. The "I" has become more prominent than the "We".

John F. Kennedy in his inaugural speech once said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." If a politician were to say this today, they would be booed or laughed off the stage. It's as if the balance has tipped too far in one direction, leading to a society where individuals are continually seeking validation, affirmation, and their rights without the accompanying sense of duty or service.

The result? A pervasive sense of emptiness and a hunger for genuine purpose. Without a "why" to live, every little obstacle seems exhaustingly impossible to overcome.



## Servant Leadership

Leadership, in its truest form, offers a remedy to this modern conundrum. When we step up to lead, we are essentially embracing the roles and responsibilities that many overlook.

We're finding purpose in service, in doing the essential tasks that hold the fabric of organisations, communities, and societies together. When leaders do this well, we call it servant leadership.

Instead of always blazing trails and standing in the spotlight, servant leaders find moments to empower individuals to make their own decisions. Servant leaders keep communication channels open, lead with humility, and are quick to show gratitude. Successfully serving while leading can help build strong relationships and foster mutual respect.

*Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.*

– Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde landed on a goldmine when he identified that people speak the truth when they feel anonymous or protected. If we take this metaphor to its logical conclusion, it becomes evident that we do not need masks if we have an environment where people feel like they will not be lynched if they speak up.

In a 2022 study of servant leadership behaviour, organisational psychologists found that it was “negatively associated with knowledge hoarding and positively associated with psychological safety”.

This means that more servant leadership behaviour in an organisation leads to less knowledge hoarding and more psychological safety in the workplace. If you find that your coworkers are resistant to sharing new ideas or feeling psychologically stressed, servant leadership may be a major part of the solution.

It's a call to action for all of us. If we wish to find genuine purpose and value in our lives, we can start by looking beyond our rights and privileges and delve into our responsibilities. By losing ourselves in service, by embracing leadership roles that many shirk, we might just find the richness and fulfillment that we seek.

In essence, the path to our truest self, as Gandhi so eloquently put it, is paved with the stones of service, responsibility, and leadership. In an age of egocentricity, we may find the “why” to live and lead before taking on any “how”.

[Read more: What is Servant Leadership?](#)

# PART TWO

## BEING A TEAM SLAYER



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## PART TWO - BEING A TEAM SLAYER

When you ascend to a leadership position, the dream is always to lead a dedicated, dynamic, and unified team. But what do we do when we're handed the proverbial lemon? A team riddled with individuals who, on the surface, display poor character, misaligned values, and seem solely driven by the allure of money.

Such is life.

The temptation, of course, is to lament the hand we're dealt, to feel victimised or powerless. But that's not leadership. True leaders look adversity in the face and see opportunity. The first realisation most new leaders need to come to grips with is that 'you don't always get to choose your team'. That is the reality many of us face. But what we do get to choose is how we respond to that team.

### Chapter One - The Inherited Lemon

It's also helpful to put the lemon team into context. It's easy to blame the actions and attitudes of employees as being the problem, but we as leaders voluntarily choose to be accountable for our team of lemons.

They might be lemons, but they are our lemons.

Author Jeremy Barnes ironically points out that lemons were not naturally occurring but were cultivated.

In his words,

*“It has therefore been scientifically proven that life does not, in fact, hand you lemons. The first step to any of us ‘making lemonade’ is to acknowledge that it was probably our choices that led to ‘life handing us a lemon’ to begin with.”*

## Make A Stand - A Lemonade Stand

While it may seem impossible to transform a group motivated solely by money into a cohesive, value-driven unit, it's not an unachievable dream. The key is to focus on what we can control and influence.

*If life gives you lemons, learn how to juggle.*

*- James Patterson*

Learn how to be flexible, manage expectations, and turn a difficult situation into a cohesive team by focusing on what we can control. What we can control at all times is our reactions, priorities, focus, and messaging.

Regardless of what is being forced upon us, we always have control over these elements, no matter how bad it gets.

## **Clear Vision**

Even if every individual on the team has misaligned values, we can set a clear, compelling vision that challenges them to align with a shared purpose.

By emphasising the bigger picture, we can inspire even the most misguided team members to see beyond their personal agendas. While we should lead by example, communicating the vision of our team or project, including the ways it may positively impact our team members, can play a major role in bringing a team together.

### ***Rigorous Accountability***

Poor character thrives in environments where mediocrity is tolerated. Establishing rigorous accountability measures ensures that laziness, dishonesty, and any form of unprofessional behaviour are quickly addressed and rectified. Make expectations clear at the beginning and hold fast to your accountability measures. Some individuals need firm lines and rules to prevent a toxic workplace.

### ***Continuous Training***

Ignorance can often be at the root of misaligned values. By investing in regular training, we not only equip our teams with skills but also expose them to new ideas, cultures, and perspectives that can redefine their values. According to LinkedIn's 2023 Workplace Learning Report, about 25% of all the skill sets required for today's jobs have changed since 2015.

Learning and development professionals expect skills to change by a full 50% between 2023 and 2027. If you and your team aren't continuing to learn, you may be on your way to becoming obsolete. As leaders, we must consistently demonstrate the value of learning, lest we too become labelled 'long in the tooth'.

[Read more: Top 9 Benefits of Online Leadership Training](#)

## ***Lead By Example***

If we want a team that values integrity, hard work, and collaboration, then be the embodiment of these traits.

*Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one.*

*- Marcus Aurelius*

Teams often mirror the energy and dedication of their leaders. Be the change you wish to see in them. When Mother Teresa saw the extreme poverty surrounding her in Calcutta, India, she didn't pull back and work on a policy change. Instead, she helped one person at a time, modelling the behaviour she wished to see in her fellow workers throughout her organisation.

At times this will require deliberately making awkward (but memorable) social situations that will become etched in people's memories as learning moments. If something needs fixing, show that it can be fixed by fixing it.

## ***Open Dialogues***

The number one rule of hostage negotiations is 'keep them talking.' This is true even when they are screaming at us. And it's true for our teams. In the world of change, one thing is most demonstrably true, dialogue is better than no dialogue. In our world there used to be a saying; 'when the dialogue stops, the arrows start.'

Leaders value open dialogue, even when it's confrontational. It's far better than the alternative.



Engage in transparent, honest conversations. Challenge your team's mindset by asking critical questions. Why do they prioritise money over everything else? Is it insecurity, past failures, or societal pressure?

Digging deep can often reveal underlying issues that, once addressed, can reshape one's outlook. Remember that the ways we communicate and learn can differ, so we should consider dialogue options that resonate with our team.

### Encourage The Right Influencers

If there's even one person on the team who possesses the right values, empower them to take on leadership roles. This can be particularly powerful when our team feels it didn't get enough recognition for hard work in the past.

Highlighting the right values played out in daily tasks can have a powerful effect on team morale. Peer influence can be a potent tool in shifting group dynamics.

To view the situation of inheriting a 'lemon' of a team as a death sentence is to misunderstand the nature of leadership.

Leadership is not about having the best resources but about making the best out of whatever resources you have. It's about taking the imperfect and moulding it, guiding it, and pushing it towards improvement.

When George Washington became the General of the Continental Army, he was less than thrilled about the quality of his new force. He wrote to his nephew that their discipline was poor, and the officers were not “worth the bread they eat”. Despite his misgivings, he continued to lead and inspire the newly formed army to victory.

So, if life has handed you a lemon of a team, roll up your sleeves and prepare to make some lemonade. With a clear vision, rigorous accountability, continuous training, leading by example, open dialogues, and encouraging peer influence, even the most sour of lemons can be turned into a sweet success story. In the worst case, it will be better off than when you found it. That’s something any leader can rest their hat on.

## Chapter Two – The Value of The Storm

Storms, in team dynamics, are inevitable, challenging periods of conflict, friction, and tension.

Paradoxically, it is within these tempestuous periods that the seeds of innovation, resilience, and excellence are sown. Why? Because it is in the storm that everything superficial gets stripped away, leaving only the core, the essence, the foundation.

A storm can easily reveal any cracks in the foundation or faulty foundation design. If teams have invested in building solid foundations prior to the storm, they stand a better chance of not just weathering it but emerging from it with a heightened capacity for performance. The adage, "Rock bottom is a great foundation to build from", holds true here.

A leader will see the storm as an opportunity.

[Read more: The Team Life Cycle](#)

### Sailing Lessons

As we often say, leadership is not about sailing on calm seas. It's about navigating through stormy waters and emerging stronger on the other side.

Leadership is not just about steering a perfectly fine vessel.

It's about navigating through storms with the broken, the imperfect, and the difficult. The mark of a true leader is not defined by the team we choose but by how we lead the team we've been given through the storm we're facing.

However, we can't merely wait for a storm and hope to come out better. After all, true leadership is revealed not when things are easy but when they're hard. Actively acknowledging, preparing for, and even embracing the storm is vital. It's like the nursery rhyme Going on a Bear Hunt:

*We can't go over it, we can't go under it, we have to go through it.*

Teams must willingly face storms head-on.

In 1914, the renowned explorer Ernest Shackleton embarked on a historic expedition with his team aboard the Endurance, aiming to achieve the first trans-Antarctic crossing. It is said he recruited his team with a job advertisement which removed all ambiguity from the equation:

*“MEN WANTED for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful, honor and recognition in case of success.*

*- Ernest Shackleton, 4 Burlington St.”*

Their journey took an unexpected turn when they found themselves trapped in Antarctic pack ice in January 1915, after having successfully navigated the Antarctic Circle.

What followed was a harrowing ordeal lasting ten months, during which the sun vanished entirely for a third of this period, casting them into prolonged darkness.

The challenges faced by Shackleton and his crew went far beyond the physical barriers of ice and the absence of sunlight. This period represented the quintessential 'storming phase' of team dynamics, which involved more than just battling external elements. The crew had to confront and overcome a myriad of internal dynamic and social challenges.

Confined in an unrelenting icy landscape, the crew's mental endurance was tested to its limits. They had to maintain hope and morale in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, battling not just physical exhaustion but also the psychological strain of isolation and uncertainty. They had to maintain unity and work collaboratively, despite the stress and potential for conflict that such extreme conditions often provoke.

Shackleton's leadership skills were crucial during this phase. He had to make critical decisions under immense pressure, not only to ensure survival but also to keep the team focused and motivated. His ability to adapt to changing circumstances and make tough calls was a key element in their endurance.

The story of Shackleton and his crew is a profound illustration of the complexities of the storming phase in team development. It goes far beyond external obstacles, delving into the realms of psychological resilience, team dynamics, leadership under pressure, and the human spirit's capacity to endure and overcome.

Their collective bravery, grit, and unwavering spirit allowed them not only to survive the Antarctic's brutal conditions but also to emerge as a testament to the power of effective teamwork and resilient leadership.

All 28 members of the expedition survived.

## Turning A Storm into A Forge

Just as steel must be forged in fire to attain its highest strength, teams, too, must be tested. This is the value of a storm. Within the storm, several phenomena occur. First, it can reveal true colours.

It's during crises and chaos that an individual's true nature shines through. The facades of competence and strength are peeled away, revealing genuine capability or the lack thereof. It is a time when people will often speak their truth for better or for worse. A storm is where we can test both our breaking point and our boiling point. Are we people who throw in the towel or shift the blame to others when the waves start crashing?

The eye of the storm is where it's most important for team members to be empowered to call out behaviours. Creating a culture where team members feel empowered to call out detrimental behaviour is vital.

The phrase "we don't do that here" can act as a powerful deterrent to toxic actions, but it's the collective responsibility of the team to uphold these standards.

Toxic actions that can poison the well of teamwork include gossip, overwork, retaliation, ambiguity, and stagnation, among others.

## Normalise The Storm

Embracing controlled challenges, or 'manufactured storms', can be a strategic approach to strengthen and prepare teams for unforeseen difficulties. Normalising storms by creating scenarios that simulate pressure and adversity allows teams to test their resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving skills in a controlled environment. This practice can build confidence, enhance team cohesion, and develop a proactive mindset towards challenges.

Just like natural storms, these manufactured challenges should be occasional and well-managed to avoid overwhelming the team. They should also not be used as a convenient excuse to squeeze more out of an already exploited team – a common mistake made by many managers in the endless pursuit of efficiency.

Good leaders identify the storm and 'label it.' Labelling is a term often used in hostage negotiations in order to contextualise and humanise what people are experiencing. For God's sake, do not try and rationalise the storm away. It will come back with great vengeance if it is ignored. Instead, we approach our teams and say,

“Team we are in a storm. We were always going to have to get to this point. It is unavoidable and an essential part of any team. Let's sit down and discuss where we are at, and what we think we need to do to move forward from this point.”

## Chapter Three – Some People Want to Watch the World Burn

We've all encountered them: individuals who revel in the disarray of the team dynamic, who take pleasure in sparking dissent, and who seem to thrive amidst drama and discord. Some people just want to watch the world burn.

It's a disconcerting truth, but in any team or organisation, there are often a few who find a perverse delight in the chaos, gossip, and turmoil that can undermine collective progress. When we raise this topic in workshops it is not uncommon for somebody to find objection to this theory and demand we expand.

The answer lies in the dystopian future hypothesised by George Orwell in his novel 1984. Oceania is the fictional totalitarian state that acts as the setting for the story. Oceania is forever at war with either one of the other two warring states, East Asia, and Eurasia.

A supposedly unwritten agreement exists between the three parties to maintain a constant state of war and chaos, with any two nations turning on the remaining other, and switching periodically to maintain survivability and longevity. In this construct, the conformity associated with having a common enemy allows the ruling elite to redirect and focus people's efforts on a common purpose.

The routinely chanted party slogan, 'War is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength' is so overt it's covert.



Keep the nation in a state of war and people will do what they're told. Deny people's freedoms and ensure their service to the party so that the 'enemy' doesn't make them slaves. Keep people ignorant of the mechanisms that shape their decision-making to ensure subservience.

There are many other reasons individuals may err towards destructive tendencies. Some may be so burned out with their role that they are looking for a way to lash out. Despite the problem in communication, they're trying to shout to the world that they're exhausted and need help. Others are acting like internal saboteurs, disillusioned with a team or company, aiming to send some ambiguous message that they are unhappy with the strategic choices being implemented.

Consciously or subconsciously, some individuals may be sparking dissent to actively halt the efforts of a team or organisation. Others may just be looking for a means to break the monotony of operations by adding some drama to the mix.

[Read more: Toxic Workplace Checklist](#)

## Beware Of Vampires

Individuals who intentionally sow dissension and cause havoc in a workplace are also known as 'morale vampires' (a term we shamelessly stole from our time in the military) for the way they feed off the discomfort of others, finding a sadistic joy in other people's miseries. These individuals can be more insidious than outwardly disruptive team members. While they might not always cause overt conflicts, their presence is palpable in the form of whispered rumours,

subtle instigations, and the spread of negative energy. If they aren't causing problems, they are certainly not trying to stop them.

The danger of 'morale vampires' is that their infectious negativity, if unchecked, can spread like wildfire, much like a cancer metastasising through the body. Their subtle tactics can have a corrosive effect, leading to decreased productivity, shattered trust, and a fragmented team spirit. Before you know it, the majority of our team is infected with a serious case of negativity, mean-spiritedness, and unproductivity.

## Slaying (Or Converting) The Vampires

So, how do leaders and teams deal with such individuals? There are three basic steps to take when you encounter a 'morale vampire' in your midst.

### ***Step 1 – Recognition.***

The first step is recognition. 'Morale vampires' often operate in the shadows, making them harder to pinpoint. We must be attuned to the team's dynamics, keeping an ear to the ground, and observing changes in team morale, increased whispers, or any signs of negativity brewing beneath the surface.

### ***Step 2 – Address.***

Once identified, it's essential to address the issue directly. This could involve one-on-one conversations to understand the motivations behind such behaviour. Sometimes, open communication might reveal

underlying issues or personal struggles, which, when addressed, can rectify the behaviour.

### ***Step 3 (If necessary) – Remove.***

If, despite interventions, the ‘morale vampire’ continues their disruptive behaviour, it might be necessary to remove them from the team. A team's cohesion, trust, and productivity are paramount. If an individual consistently jeopardises these elements, their removal protects the team's greater good.

It's crucial to understand that the removal of such individuals isn't about punishment but rather about preserving the health and well-being of the wider team. Like a physician removing a cancerous mass to save the patient, sometimes, hard decisions must be made for the sake of the bigger picture.

[Read more: How to Have Difficult Conversations](#)

### **Celebrate a Full Recovery**

Once a ‘morale vampire’ either recovers from their harmful actions or is removed from your team, it's important to set the proper tone. While we aren't celebrating the removal of a team member or our ability to influence others, we should find positive ways to set a new tone for the workplace.

Now that there isn't a depressive, chaotic, or negative energy choking the team, it's time to replace it with a positive mindset. Reaffirm the

team values, point out successful examples of teamwork, or take other steps to build a healthy environment from the gloomy ashes.

*Positive reinforcement is the most powerful leadership tool.*

*- Aubrey Daniels*

The psychological concept of positive reinforcement is easy to understand but can be hard to implement on a daily basis. At its core, the concept states that rewarded behaviour is more likely to be repeated. While negative behaviours need to be addressed in the workplace, the overall tone of a team and a leader's communication style should reward positive behaviour.

## Don't Start a Witch Hunt

If high school taught us anything, it was the power of groupthink and the security afforded by anonymity. We would have all experienced it at one point. A group of highly anxious teenagers all awkwardly bumbling their way through puberty desperately trying to be cool, or at least not uncool.

The net effect was a form of mass hysteria not too dissimilar to the Salem Witch Hunts of old (1692 – 1693). When a kid noticed they were becoming the centre of attention for the wrong reasons, they had but a short amount of time to redirect the focus onto somebody else, lest they be pummelled with the full weight of judgment that comes with a scared and disparaging crowd.

From the moment of detection, there wasn't much time to point at somebody else and draw out their faults. It would be nice to think that people inherently change in their practices as they get older, but we see the behaviour replicated in countless organisations we visit. The only difference is it is a little more refined and a little harder to detect.

In true poetic fashion, those who partake in witch hunts often see themselves at the end of a noose. They set an environment of anarchy that swings back around and bites them.

The recurrence of witch hunts identifies an uncomfortable truth about our nature as people. It can be disconcerting if we let it, but it can also be highly advantageous.

It shows us the value of having a common enemy. When there is a common enemy, we prompt loyalty and focus. This is incredibly useful information for any leader.

We want all the benefits associated with having a common enemy, but we do not want to set the conditions by which it comes back around and bites us.

The answer: Make your common enemy a problem, not a person.

In workshops, we often use the example of charities and not-for-profit entities. The best ones spend huge amounts of time communicating the importance of their cause. In this case, let's take 'youth homelessness' as the identified social affliction requiring fixing.

No reasonable or sensible human would disagree that youth homelessness is bad. Almost all would show solidarity in agreeing that it should be addressed. With the correct leadership accompanied by suitably aligned messaging, we start to see people becoming emotionally engaged with the topic. They identify the common enemy (i.e. the problem) of 'youth homelessness.'

People align their frustration energies towards hating the problem of youth homelessness. Some people become so passionate that they invest some of their personal money towards the goal. Some open up rooms in their houses. Some assist in door knocking. Some do charity drives and events. All rally behind the cause. All are fiercely passionate. All have a common enemy.

Notice one crucial distinction - the organisation didn't take the additional (but enticing) step of blaming somebody; external groups or individuals. Instead, they focused their efforts on the problem, not the person. This is where the value lies.

## Chapter Four – Masking the Truth

In a world that often prizes appearances, the temptation to mask the truth can be overwhelming. Whether it's a corporate executive downplaying a company setback or a team member hiding an error, the act of concealing issues, big or small, is more common than one might think.

But what is often perceived as a short-term protective strategy can, in the long run, have disastrous consequences.

Enron is the largest and most obvious example of the consequences of lying and deception in the workplace. The Enron scandal, a landmark in corporate malfeasance, epitomises the destructive impact of lying and deception in the business world. Enron, once a celebrated energy company, collapsed spectacularly due to systemic and extensive corporate fraud.

This case underscores a critical lesson: dishonesty, even in small measures, can escalate and culminate in significant organisational failure.

Enron's downfall was not just about the immediate financial losses; it also reflected a deeper problem of a workplace culture rooted in deceit and rule breaking. This culture fostered over time through repeated unethical decisions, ultimately led to the company's demise.

This example serves as a cautionary tale, demonstrating how masking the truth, even in what may appear as trivial matters, can corrupt organisational integrity and lead to disastrous consequences.

Sometimes, a decision that seems small can actually translate into a major setback for our organisation, our team, and ourselves. Masking the truth can create a culture of deception and rule-breaking in our organisation. Whether the culture comes from the top, middle, or bottom, it can create a mindset within the company that tolerates the behaviour.

When we mask the truth, especially in professional or team settings, we unwittingly set ourselves up for bigger problems. Hidden issues can't be addressed. If a team or organisation is unaware of a challenge, how can they rally resources, support, or assistance to tackle it?

By the time the concealed truth finally surfaces, the issue might have snowballed into a much larger problem, demanding more effort, time, and resources to resolve.

At the heart of this behaviour is often a paralysing fear: the fear of being perceived as inadequate or incompetent. Leaders may inadvertently create this culture of paralysing fear, demanding success at any cost. While there is a time and place to demand success at any cost, the idea of facing potential criticism or judgment can lead individuals to believe that it's safer to lie by omission than to be transparent about issues.

But this fear, while deeply human, is short-sighted. In trying to preserve one's image momentarily, one might be compromising long-term trust and credibility.



## ... And Nothing but the Truth

*The slickest way in the world to lie is to tell the right amount of truth  
at the right time - and then shut up.*

*- Robert A. Heinlein*

Lying by omission is a particularly insidious form of deceit. By withholding crucial information, individuals might feel they are not technically 'lying.' But this can be a fatal misconception.

Omission can be just as damaging, if not more so, than outright falsehoods. When stakeholders or team members eventually uncover the truth, the sense of betrayal they feel can be profound, leading to eroded trust and damaged relationships.

Don't give in to that temptation. Avoid lies, including lies by omission, so you can lead by example and value truth over appearances.

While there are necessarily some pieces of information that don't need to be shared with every individual in an organisation, and some organisations have necessary levels of restricted access to information, it's important to think very carefully before we decide to withhold information from our team.

As psychologist and professor Jeremy Hunter says,

*Leaders who withhold information essentially shoot themselves in  
the foot because that breeds mistrust and uncertainty.*

Conversely, there is a tendency for some people to elasticise the other way and lean on their value of 'honest' by rationalising 'I just say the truth and if other people can't deal with it, that's their problem.' This, too, is a very dangerous prospect that sits at another end of the spectrum. People who adopt this rationale most often leave a wake of destruction behind them. In fostering a mentality like this they have missed one crucial piece of information. There are multiple ways to tell the same truth, some more resourceful than others.

When speaking to others run it through the following filters:

- Is this accurate?
- Does it amplify our understanding of the context?
- Is it helpful and resourceful information?
- Am I conveying it for the right reasons?

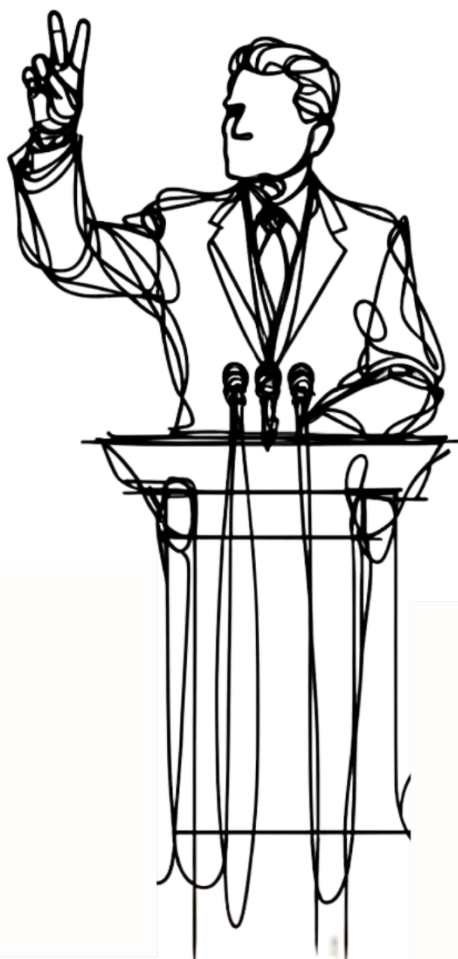


THE EIGHTH MILE  
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# PART THREE

## THE 'CULT' IN CULTURE





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# NEWSLETTER

SIGN UP FOR HIGHLY-OPINIONATED  
LEADERSHIP VIEWPOINTS



## **PART THREE - THE 'CULT' IN CULTURE**

The term "cult" originates from the Latin word "cultus," which means "care" or "adoration."

More broadly, it is where the term 'culture' is drawn from, a commonly omitted truth that many educators dare not integrate into their educational workshops. Originally, it was used to describe a system of religious reverence and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object.

This classical definition referred to the formal religious practices of ancient Romans, encompassing various rituals and ceremonies dedicated to gods, goddesses, or other deities.

Over time, the meaning of "cult" evolved. By the early 17th century, it began to acquire its contemporary connotations.

In modern usage, the term often refers to a new religious movement or other group whose beliefs or practices are considered abnormal or bizarre.

The modern interpretation of "cult" can have derogatory connotations and is often associated with groups seen as unorthodox, extreme, or dangerous. The key defining feature of any cult is its charismatic leader who, almost without fail, egotistically places themselves at the centre of the solution.

## Chapter One - Charisma: The Cure and The Curse

Both Mahatma Gandhi and Adolf Hitler were extremely charismatic leaders. Both prompted huge representations of followership. Both sought to overthrow (or replace) traditional or existing power structures. Both messaged about the importance of values surrounding solidarity, loyalty, and responsibility. The most significant deviation that led them down different paths was their messaging on morality.

Charisma alone can be a cure, a curse, or a mixture of both. It's a compelling quality, one that draws people in and can inspire unwavering loyalty and devotion. It is the sparkle in a leader's eye, the conviction in their voice, and the magnetic aura that surrounds them. But as history has shown us, charisma, in its potent allure, can also be a curse used to manipulate and deceive.

Leading with charisma is a powerful thing. Without morality, however, it can also create a platform that puts the 'cult' in culture.

Charisma is the kind of thing that's difficult to define but easy to see carried out as great leaders inspire others to do great things. When a team is faced with impossible, or just plain difficult, tasks, charisma may be the glue that holds everything together.

## Charisma: The Cure

With the right aims, charisma can help a leader achieve amazing things. The Agent leadership style characterises the ways this powerful trait can work together with a leader's other talents and abilities. Many agent-style leaders spread their influence through stories, insights, and relatable experiences. They are natural communicators and storytellers, never letting go of the big picture.

Charismatic leaders often rely on evoking strong emotions, creating narratives that resonate deeply with their audience. Facts, on the other hand, are cold, impartial, and devoid of emotional allure.

Facts and emotions aren't enemies; they're two sides of the human experience.

While facts provide the structure and framework, emotions add depth and richness. Recognising the value and limitations of each allows for a more holistic understanding, informed decision-making, and genuine human connection.

In the face of extreme racial discrimination in South Africa, including his arrest in 1962, Nelson Mandela continued to speak out against discrimination. As well as write about his experience in jail and promote a free, democratic society. He didn't lash out or even lay out a point-by-point rational argument for his concluding words when on trial.

He spoke these charismatic, influential lines instead,

*“I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”*

In the dichotomy of facts versus emotion, charisma usually leans heavily towards the latter.

But for sustainable, ethical leadership, a balance between the two is crucial. It is this equilibrium that prevents charisma from spiralling into the realm of manipulation.

## Charisma: The Curse

Cult leaders also have charisma, using their charm for self-centred and self-referencing purposes. Every cult that has ever risen to prominence, instilling unquestionable faith in its followers, did so under the guidance of a charismatic leader. These leaders wield charisma like a maestro with a baton, orchestrating the movements, beliefs, and actions of their adherents.

We don't need to look hard through history, or even current events, to find horrific examples of cultish leaders manipulating a group of people. Leaders don't have to create a cult to use charisma to manipulate and deceive others. Charisma can be a double-edged sword.



While the extreme cases might make a good headline, it's more helpful for most leaders to think about the middle ground. The moments when charisma is definitely an influence, but it isn't immediately clear whether that influence is positive or negative.

## The Great Balancing Act

For Elon Musk, charisma has been a major ingredient in his most and least successful decisions. His powerful personality and leadership style allowed him to lead companies as diverse as SpaceX, Neuralink, X (formerly Twitter), and Tesla. At the time of writing this book, he was the world's richest person, and more than likely still is. His estimated value is more than \$225 billion.

Musk's charisma also makes it difficult for anyone working with him to disagree with his decisions or voice concerns. The result has been safety violations at Tesla, rocket disasters at SpaceX, and the stream of controversial decisions he's made since acquiring Twitter and renaming it X.

While he may not be literally leading a cult, Musk's actions have led Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, to say that Musk,

*“Wants to be seen as the important person and be like a cult leader. A lot of people will follow them no matter what they say.”*

There is an ironic twist to the tale of charisma: often, it takes a charismatic leader to counteract another. Just as a cult leader can sway the masses, another charismatic figure can emerge, armed with a

different narrative, captivating enough to shift loyalties and restore balance.

This isn't a battle of facts but rather a tug-of-war of emotions. You may not have people around you comparing you to a cult leader, but it's an important lesson in the way a strong, charismatic leader can quickly turn from inspiring success to single-handedly navigating a team or organisation toward failure.

No leader is omnipotent, and self-awareness is a hallmark of great leadership. Recognising our leadership style leanings, whether towards charisma, analytical thinking, or any other trait, is vital. Once identified, the next step is to find a counterbalance. If your strength is in your charismatic appeal, pairing up with someone more grounded in facts and logic can create a well-rounded leadership dynamic. This symbiosis ensures that the magnetic pull of charisma is always checked and balanced by reason.

## Chapter Two - A Culture of Convenient Crisis

*Deadlines are often arbitrary, almost always flexible, and hardly ever trigger the consequences we think – or are told – they will.*

*- Chris Voss*

### Business As Usual

People often hold a misconception about military leadership. Many assume that the most difficult times to lead are during intense firefights and combat operations. In our experience, rarely was this true.

It was during the incessantly long periods of boredom and monotony that a leader really had to step up and get creative. During these times it is when a leader must use an array of tools to engage with their teams and keep them motivated. Let's not kid ourselves. Business as usual (BAU) leadership is tough. It's the long, consistent marathon, not the adrenaline-pumping sprint. It requires patience, persistence, and a relentless drive to motivate teams through the mundane.

*If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception; it is a prevailing attitude.*

*- Colin Powell*

BAU leadership makes the prevailing attitude one of efficiency. It's working together toward a workplace where team members understand their roles, feel confident to complete their daily tasks, and have time to all come together to create a cohesive long-term plan.

These may sound like idealistic, hard-to-reach goals when held against your current workplace environment. You may feel you can implement BAU leadership. You may not be able to immediately do so. The question is, can you afford to not achieve this team culture?

In his book *Into Thin Air* which we referenced in the earlier parts of this book, Jon Krakauer describes how climbers call the Southeast Ridge trail of Mount Everest the "Yak Route". It's meant to be an insult, describing how anyone can climb the mountain on this path.

After his climb, Krakauer describes the task as being less about technical difficulty and more about the constant, ongoing, step-by-step slog up the side of the world's tallest mountain.

## Crisis Leadership

In contrast, a crisis provides that immediate jolt of urgency. Consider global response to events like the COVID-19 pandemic, where the urgency and magnitude of the problem led people to follow directives, desperate for a reprieve from the chaos and fear.

In Part Two, Chapter 3, we explored George Orwell's 1984 and the self-generated and induced chaos that afforded the ruling elite absolute power.

This eerie representation describes what is commonly referred to as 'crisis leadership'. Crisis leadership is an incredibly important function when chaos erupts. It is a time when leaders are blessed with reactive obedience. People do what they are told because they want the discomfort to stop. The conformity allows leaders to move fast and teams to be highly responsive. And this would be fine, if leaders knew when to stop.

There are those leaders out there that grow to enjoy the power that comes with crisis, and will either deliberately or inadvertently, keep their teams in a state of crisis. In the short term, it ensures conformity and loyalty. In the longer term, it fractures the team and destroys it.

In a crisis, leadership can seem somewhat more straightforward. Decisions need to be made swiftly, teams rally together, and a sense of purpose is often amplified. The mission becomes clear: address the crisis and restore normalcy.

As a result, leaders might mistakenly believe they extract a higher level of performance during these times.

The urgency provides a clear negative outcome to run from, while the promise of resolution offers a positive goal to aim for. It's the classic carrot and stick, reward, and fear dynamic, amplified tenfold.

We use a study on rats by Jaak Panksepp to demonstrate the reward and fear dynamic during our Personal Development & Leadership Program. The study outlines how far a rat, motivated by a reward, will run compared to when the smell of cat urine is placed behind it. It demonstrates that while reward-based (moving towards) motivation will see the rodent hurry to get the food, the speed at which the animal runs is nothing compared to when the smell of the enemy is behind it (running from). We also know that rats tire very quickly if only motivated by fear.

However, if we combine the two, finding the right balance between reward and fear, we can motivate the rat in a much more effective and efficient way.

[Read more: The Science Behind Change Management](#)

## Every Day Can't Be a Crisis

It's one thing to navigate an unavoidable crisis; it's entirely another thing to perpetuate one for convenience or expedience. Teams might initially respond with increased productivity and focus, but what happens when the state of emergency becomes the norm?

*Any idiot can face a crisis; it's this day-to-day living that wears you out.*

*- Anton Chekhov*

People naturally want stability and predictability, not a workplace filled with day-to-day crises and stressful situations.

When leaders artificially maintain a sense of impending doom, they exploit a basic human instinct: the desire to escape discomfort.

It's the equivalent of keeping a team perpetually running from a looming shadow, with the promise that if they work hard enough, fast enough, they might just escape.

Think of the study with the rats. We can successfully encourage the rat to run away from the fear at an amazing speed, but it will tire quickly and eventually stop running a lot sooner than if we had combined the fear and reward systems.

Just like with the rat, this relentless pace and pressure erode team morale, trust, and well-being. Burnout becomes commonplace. The culture of innovation, creativity, and collaboration— hallmarks of thriving organisations— dwindles, replaced by anxiety, fear, and a pervasive sense of impending doom. What was once a motivated team becomes a group of individuals, each scrambling to put out fires, with no time or energy left for forward-thinking or strategic planning. All living within a perpetual state of fight, flight, or freeze.

For leaders tempted by the seductive power of crisis-induced productivity, it's time to step back and reflect. Is this the legacy you want to leave? A trail of exhausted, demoralised teams, always in response mode, never proactive?

Instead, we might have to consider taking the foot off the throttle. Yes, it's hard. It requires vision, charisma, and a deep understanding of individual team members' motivations. It means articulating clear, inspiring goals, and providing both positive incentives to aim for and

negative outcomes to avoid. But most importantly, it requires authenticity.

Genuine care for team well-being, a commitment to sustainable growth, and a recognition that leadership isn't about extracting the maximum from teams at any cost. Very rarely does history speak favourably of leaders who adopted 'the end justifies the means' rationales.



## Chapter Three – Not All Opinions Are Equal

Everyone has an opinion. It's an age where ideas flow freely, and everyone's voice can be heard. Yet, it's crucial to recognise an essential truth: not all opinions are created equal. The weight and worth of opinions are more often contingent on expertise, timing, responsibility, and experience.

Once we move away from a culture of convenient crisis and start implementing a BAU environment, we'll likely hear more opinions freely floating around the workplace. With the right guidance, this can have a powerful effect. Without guidance, it can quickly turn into a nightmarish situation, with everyone shouting through proverbial loudspeakers without listening to each other.

The kind of situation we see all too often on social media channels. It also sets the conditions for less informed extroverts to drown out the practical ideas of less assertive introverts who might not have an appetite for 'who speaks loudest.'

### Jack Of All Trades, Master of None

There's undeniable value in having generalists in a team. These are the individuals who have a broad overview, can connect the dots between diverse disciplines, and often come up with innovative solutions.

However, when it comes to specialised challenges or issues, the opinions of subject matter experts (SMEs) naturally carry more

weight. Their depth of knowledge, built over years of focused study and experience, provides insights that generalists might overlook.

It's the difference between asking a general practitioner about a generic health issue and consulting a cardiologist for a heart condition. In our old world, it was the difference between a machine gunner and a sniper.

Sometimes we needed a machine gun to thin the herd, sometimes we needed to take out a single high-value target.

Give space for the opinions of SMEs to be heard, even if they aren't comfortable. St. John Ervine wrote,

*“Every man should periodically be compelled to listen to opinions which are infuriating to him. To hear nothing but what is pleasing to one is to make a pillow of the mind.”*

The term ‘collaboration’ is used in certain circles as the be-all and end-all. In the world of leadership, it is the supposed silver bullet, ‘if in doubt, collaborate out.’ But like most things in leadership, it is a double-edged sword. Collaboration requires the collection and aggregation of ideas from a plethora of sources. It is a lengthy process and, if not closely managed, results in missed opportunities.

There is also a strong argument to suggest that many leaders do this as a means of spreading the risk among other members of their team, particularly when a document emerges at the end of it with ten signatures. A leadership failsafe to say, ‘Hey, we all came up with the plan.’

It is a leadership responsibility to discern when it is a time for collaboration or a time for decision-making. When time is poor, it often requires us to go straight for the jugular of the problem, bringing our SMEs into the discussion quickly. Once in the conversation, we provide the context, the priorities and ask for their specialised advice. We then make the decision, absorb the risk, and hold on for the ride.

### Listen To Value, Not Volume

In any organisation or situation, there will always be those who readily voice their views, often loudly. Volume should not be mistaken for value. The peanut gallery, while entitled to their opinions, often lacks skin in the game. Their opinions, though potentially valid, don't carry the weight of those who step forward, take responsibility, and shoulder the consequences of decisions.

There's a stark difference between speculative commentary and informed opinion born from responsibility and accountability.

*I shall adopt new views as fast as they shall appear to be true views.*

*- Abraham Lincoln*

While an opinion might be valid, its relevance can be vastly affected by timing and prevailing conditions. A brilliant marketing strategy conceived during an economic boom might not be applicable during a recession. The "when" and "under what circumstances" can significantly elevate or diminish the value of an opinion.

It is also worth considering the concept of the ‘vocal minority’ vs the ‘silent majority’. Subjectively, we have observed this in the vast majority of organisations we have supported. In every group, there exists a silent majority that purportedly represents the interests and ideas of the majority. Rarely, is this true.

More often what rings true, is that a silent majority exists – a group who would self-characterise as doers, ‘getting it done,’ and not requiring themselves to be the centre of attention. To this end, the vocal minority mistranslate a lack of rebuttal or debate, as validation for their claims. But there is often one thing they do not consider about the silent majority. Everybody has a tolerance point, whereby they eventually speak out, one way or another. They either speak out verbally or with their actions (or vote).

Over the last ten years, the Western world has seen this manifest several times, with arguably increasing frequency. UK’s Brexit (2016), the USA’s Donald Trump election (2016), Australia’s triple-liberal election (2013, 2016, 2019), and the recent rejection of the Australian ‘the voice’ referendum (2023) all demonstrated the same pattern of behaviour.

The polls confidently predicted one thing (albeit in a reduced sense with Australia’s ‘the voice’ referendum), and the results were manifestly different.

Ultimately, leaving a vocal minority very confused as to the outcome. The reason: the silent majority spoke with their anonymous vote.

In a follow-up investigation by the Association of Market and Social Research Organisations and the Statistical Society of Australia, it stated that the incredibly inaccurate polls were resultant of “samples [which] were unrepresentative and inadequately adjusted.”

In our organisations, the silent majority will speak with their feet if they feel like they are not being represented adequately. Ignore them at your peril.

### Been There, Done That

Experience based on successes and failures is invaluable. It offers a roadmap of what worked and what didn't. Someone who has "been there, done that" naturally brings a perspective enriched by real-world experiences. Their subjective opinions are aggregated to provide objective credibility.

While it's essential not to get trapped by past experiences, they serve as useful signposts.

*Beware old men in a profession where men usually die young.*

*- Kevin Lacz*

In the grand symphony of voices, it's essential to know which ones carry the tune and which ones provide the harmony. Without a suitable blend of ideas, plans fail. Recognising that not all opinions are equal isn't about silencing voices; it's about understanding and valuing them in their appropriate context.

## Chapter Four – ‘Cancel Culture’ Leading To ‘Cancer Culture’

In the early 2010’s the term ‘cancel culture’ originated, and its usage has evolved over time. The concept refers to the practice of publicly calling out and boycotting individuals or entities for behaviour that is deemed offensive or objectionable. The origins of the term can be traced to discussions on social media platforms, particularly Twitter (now called X, as we mentioned earlier).

The term gained broader recognition and usage around 2017-2018 as instances of public figures facing widespread criticism and consequences for their actions became more prominent. It's important to note that the term itself doesn't have a single, clear-cut origin, but rather emerged organically in online discussions and debates surrounding accountability, social justice, and public shaming.

We would be naïve to assume that the practice has not leaked into our organisations at every level.

Noting the negative connotations of the term, many advocates have sought to replace the term with ‘accountability culture.’ Most would agree that accountability in and of itself is a positive thing, and people should be discerning about their language and its implications. The problems arise with the practical application of the concept.

Who decides who is judge, jury, and executioner? Does offence taken constitute intentional offence? Does it matter? Does somebody’s right to be protected from offence override another’s right to freedom of speech?

*In order to be able to think, you have to risk being offensive.*

*- Unknown*

Let's be explicitly clear, the aim should never be to deliberately offend, but it is sometimes a necessary evil in the pursuit of truth. Particularly when what constitutes 'offensive' is highly subjective and is open to manipulation and distortion.

With this considered, one should never rationalise crudeness under the guise of 'honesty' as an open slather to hurt others with ill-thought-out deliveries.

We spoke previously about the person who proudly proclaims, 'I just say it as it is, and if others can't deal with it, it's their problem.' In the pursuit of truth, don't become a dick.

What should be understood, is like most concepts in leadership, things that seem positive can quickly become the inverse if left unchecked. What would otherwise be a tool for helping, can rapidly become a weapon for harming. One which is so overt it's covert.

Make sure 'cancel culture' does not creep into your team ethos.

## Negativity Bias in The Workplace

One factor that makes cancer culture feel like a haunting presence over everything in the workplace is negativity bias.

Basically, negativity bias means that we're more likely to remember and dwell on negative emotions and actions rather than positive ones. Despite a successful presentation with a dozen compliments, you'll probably remember that one tired look or half-eye roll from a burnt-out employee dragging their feet across the door for "yet another meeting".

The team is likely affected by this, too. A minor speed bump in an otherwise successful project gets all the attention. A few daunting details overwhelm the big picture and sap motivation.

Instead of pressing forward in tackling a project with optimism and a healthy perspective, negativity bias can make a snide comment or negative detail turn into the most important factor.

At times, we need to lead by example and help the team overcome negativity bias. If a small detail is becoming a distracting preoccupation, it may be time to carve out time to take it on.

*If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning.  
And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one  
first.*

*- Mark Twain*



If neuroscience has taught us anything, it is that where we cue our attention directly influences what we experience.

As leaders, it is prudent to realise that where we draw people's attention will ultimately shape what they feel. Superimpose complications associated with a negativity bias, and we see the need to identify a higher ratio of positive things as compared to negative things, that is if we genuinely care about the longer-term viability of the team.

## Removing The Cancer

Most would agree that cancer is bad, and it cannot be left to metastasise.

But a good surgeon does not just dive into invasive surgery half-cocked with nothing but a saw and some sutures. One must be controlled, targeted, and precise. The temptation is to launch in and identify individuals or groups and start gutting them from the organisation.

If we are not very careful, we can risk misdiagnosing the troublemaker groups and removing the very individuals who might have provided hope for a better future.

When Satya Nadella became CEO of Microsoft, he knew the dangers of cancer culture. From day one, he worked to ensure that the overall culture of Microsoft moved from “A know-it-all mindset to a learn-it-all one”.

A know-it-all declaring an opinion may be right in some situations, but this kind of toxic workplace behaviour drowns out debate, ignores critical voices, and can spread like wildfire.

One of the more frustrating ironies is that when we remove one toxic leader, another can just as quickly take their place. It's like a Hydra, cut off the head of the snake, and two more will manifest.

We experienced this through the myriad of regime changes we partook in within the Middle East. If the conditions were not set, the replacement of one destructive leader, followed by another, and another, inadvertently positioned the firer as the tyrant.

If somebody has demonstrated some leadership talent, the next step is ensuring they are morally and ethically aligned. Don't assume common understanding or ethos. Assumptions coupled with wishful thinking are a fast track to unrealised expectations.



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# THE SUMMIT

**WHERE TO FROM HERE?**



# **THE SUMMIT - WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

This resource is only the beginning of a conversation. Each topic is a rabbit warren of contradictions and depth that would take a lifetime to understand.

There is no leadership book in existence that is able to provide bespoke solutions. It can't ask questions, interrogate the specific process, and provide team-specific recommendations based on the specific problems you're facing.

For real-world answers tailored to specific industries and battles, we need conversations. Ideally, conversations with leaders who can empathise with first-hand experience and have similar-looking scars.

We often talk about the value of mentors in helping us through tough times or acting as a sounding board for ideas and theories. Being able to discuss challenges with someone who has sourced different experiences allows us to build more robust strategies.

For some, it may be time for individual answers. Individual training offers a self-paced learning environment combined with the benefits of a leadership mentor. Most importantly, you can work through your specific situation with tailored strategies and tactics.

Individual leadership training gives you space away from the team to reflect on specific challenges and steps forward. It helps you focus on areas you can control.

In other situations, it may take the entire team to fix the team culture. From a team of lemons to a pervasive cancer culture, some issues may be best resolved by coming together as a team for in-person learning and off-site retreats. The training sessions aren't just for teams in the midst of crisis, however.

Fuelling good teams to become even better is just as important as fixing broken teams. Team training sessions can be powerful bonding experiences, where individuals build something greater than themselves. It can be a powerful moment to admit a particular challenge in front of your co-workers, and even more powerful to find solutions knowing your team has your back.

If you're thinking about any of these options, know that they're not easy. Choosing to level up your leadership requires investment, dedication, and strength to dive deep into the inner workings of your own brain. Naturally, doing this alone is a lot more difficult than having a battle buddy for support.

This is exactly what we provide at The Eighth Mile Consulting. We have a [suite of online programs](#) designed to help leaders at every stage of the journey, whether emerging or experienced.

Additionally, we don't subscribe to the one-size-fits-all solution to team training. Each team is unique and requires a bespoke approach to unite them as a high-performing team.

There is also a big difference between facilitation and presentation. Personally, we cannot think of anything worse than sitting there as somebody preaches at the audience, amplified by a weaponised PowerPoint - ‘Death by PowerPoint’ as our team like to joke. Frankly, it makes us want to puke. We wouldn’t wish it on our enemies.

Instead, we believe the value comes from deep discussions with teams that dare to dive into the contradictions that characterise leadership.

*“We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard. Because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.”*

*- Former U.S. President John F. Kennedy*

Leadership sucks, but it’s worth it. We hope by now, you can agree that these ideas need not be mutually exclusive concepts.

Some of the most challenging, thankless, and frustrating hurdles in life can also be the most rewarding, worthwhile, and meaningful. This paradox is at the heart of leadership, known by anyone who has answered the call to take the hard road.

If you need a battle buddy, reach out.

Until next time, safe travels and best wishes,

David, Jonathan & Evan  
*Directors of The Eighth Mile Consulting*





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# THE CURSED CROWN

CONFRONTING THE BRUTAL TRUTHS AND DILEMMAS OF LEADERSHIP



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