

RE-AUTHORING LEADERSHIP

BREAKING THE SCRIPT TO LEAD BEYOND THE PREDICTABLE

MIKE BENNETTS

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BEYOND THE PREDICTABLE

By writing the story of the leader you choose to become

MIKE BENNETTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Bennetts is best known as the founding Chief Executive of Z Energy, having transitioned the company from its previous global owners in 2010. In thirteen years at the helm of Z, Mike led significant corporate events like launching Z as a brand, an IPO, \$3 billion of M&A deals, debt and equity raises, and a takeover response. In 2016, Mike and Z were respectively CEO and Company of the Year in the Deloitte Top 200. Mike was the founding Convenor of the Climate Leaders Coalition from 2017 to 2022, reflecting his commitment to the energy transition and the challenges around environmental and social sustainability.

Mike developed cross-cultural leadership experience by working in Africa, Asia and Europe between 1992 to 2008. He has held governance roles since 1999 in joint venture, private and public companies in South Africa, China, Singapore and New Zealand. Mike is currently the Chair of Punakaiki Fund Limited, a \$110-million venture capital fund, having started with an initial equity of \$1.5 million in 2014.

Across his two decades of experience as a CEO, Mike is known for his transformational leadership style and commitment to the development of the people he works with.

Since mid-2023, this is reflected in Mike's venture as an Executive Coach (Kaiārahi) at Taumata Advisory Limited. Mike's stated purpose is to "realise individual and organisational potential" through his work as an author, speaker, coach and mentor.

Mike's client base of leaders and leadership teams spans from large private and public companies, through to SMEs, start-ups and NGOs across New Zealand, Australia and Singapore.

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Introduction

Leadership is often taught as if it were a set of skills, a checklist of competencies to master, or a playbook of best practices to apply. However, in my experience – both leading organisations and coaching leaders at all levels – it is not that simple. Leadership is not only about *what we do*, but about *how we experience the world, who we are while doing it, and how we choose to make meaning of events as they unfold*.

This book takes a different approach. It is not a traditional leadership “manual”. It is an invitation to re-author your leadership story – to recognise the patterns that have shaped you, to question the assumptions you carry, and to deliberately write a new script that better serves your people, your purpose, and the future you want to create.

In other words, you can shift from being shaped by experience, to shaping your experience.

Why Re-Authoring?

We all live inside stories. Stories about who we are, what success looks like, what’s possible, and what’s off-limits. Some of these narratives are passed down through our families, cultures, or the communities we belong to. Others are shaped by our professional experiences, our early wins, our deepest failures. Left unquestioned, these stories become invisible scripts that guide our decisions.

The problem is not that these scripts exist – the problem is that they often go unexamined. And when leaders operate on unexamined stories, they risk becoming trapped in old identities, limited by outdated mental models, or blind to emerging possibilities. Additionally, all of this happened in the past, yet we still let it shape our futures.

Re-authoring leadership is the practice of pausing, noticing, and rewriting. It is the practice of stepping back from the role you are playing, seeing the stage more clearly, and daring to tell a new story about who you are and how you will lead.

Four Frames for Re-Authoring Leadership

This book is built around four interwoven frames that help you see your leadership story more clearly:

1. Phenomenology – how you experience the world in the present moment.
2. Ontology – the deeper question of being: who you *are* as a leader, not just what you *do*.

3. Identity – the stories you tell about yourself and how they limit or expand your leadership.
4. Behavioural Patterns – the almost preconditioned responses that keep you stuck, unless you learn to disrupt and rewrite them.

Each chapter explores one of these frames, showing how it shapes your leadership and how you can re-author it. Along the way, we will examine leaders from around the world – global figures who embody resilience, possibility, and transformation.

How to Read This Book

Every chapter follows a deliberate rhythm, designed not just to inform but to transform.

- Metaphors: Leadership is lived in images and intuitions as much as in data. I use metaphors because they offer a new lens, a way of seeing things from a different perspective.
- Case Studies: We begin with a story of a well-known leader whose journey illustrates the theme. These are not meant to be flawless heroes, but rather real, complex individuals who have learned to lead differently.
- Models: We then ground the ideas in a well-researched framework or model.
- Practical reflections: Tools you can apply directly in your leadership practice.
- Write your own chapter: Each chapter ends with bold and reflective questions. Not a checklist or an action item, but a provocation. A mirror to hold up, asking you to confront the story you are telling yourself and take action to write for yourself.

This structure matters because leadership growth rarely happens through information alone. It happens when reflection, story, and practice intersect. My aim is to provide you with more than insights. I want to give you a set of lenses you can return to whenever you feel stuck, stretched, or called into a bigger version of yourself.

An Invitation

You may be reading this as a CEO leading a large enterprise, a founder growing something new, or a leader in any business, government or community. Wherever you sit, the call is the same: leadership today is too complex to rely on autopilot. We need leaders who are willing to pause, to question, to re-author.

This book is an invitation to that work. Not a final script, but a mirror, a pen, and a reasonably blank page – if you choose to relate to it that way.

Chapter 1

Phenomenology – The Lived Experience of Leadership

Are you leading from who you truly are, or from who you think you're supposed to be?

Leadership is not only about the strategies we employ, the structures we design, or the results we deliver. At its core, it is about the way we experience the world, and how that experience shapes the choices we make. Think of it like wearing tinted glasses. If you put on blue lenses, the world looks colder and sharper. With rose-coloured ones, everything softens. The world itself hasn't changed – only how it occurs to you.

This is where phenomenology – the study of lived experience – becomes a powerful framework for leadership. It is not just what happens, but how it happens for someone. Originating in philosophy, phenomenology invites us to examine the world not as a fixed set of facts, but as it occurs to those living in it. This isn't philosophical abstraction. It has very practical consequences. If you believe "my team is resistant to change", you'll see every question as defiance. If you believe "my team is concerned about being left behind", the same questions occur as engagement. What you see is not what is – it's what occurs to you.

For leaders, this distinction is critical. People don't act based on "objective" reality. They act based on how that reality presents itself to them – emotionally, cognitively, relationally. Phenomenology asks us to slow down and notice: how do I perceive the world? What assumptions am I bringing into this moment? How does my experience of being here, now, influence what I choose?

Phenomenology does not attempt to define absolute truths. Instead, it invites us to explore our perspective – our consciousness in the moment. For leaders, this is vital. We do not act in a vacuum; we act in the flow of lived experience. By becoming more attuned to that experience, we increase our capacity to respond with wisdom rather than habit.

Phenomenology reveals a fundamental leadership truth – people don't respond to what is, they respond to how it occurs. This gap between reality and occurrence is where engagement is won or lost, or extraordinary results delivered or not.

Leadership, then, is not simply about changing outcomes. It's about shaping how situations occur for others. In terms of reality versus occurrence, there is a hidden gap:

- A strategy may be well crafted – but if it occurs to people as vague or threatening, it won't be acted on.
- A change initiative may be well intentioned – but if it occurs as betrayal, it will be resisted.
- Even a compliment can backfire – if it occurs as patronising.

To lead through this lens is to move beyond instruction and into interpretation. It involves:

- Curiosity over certainty – Ask yourself, "How is this landing for them?" instead of assuming your message is clear.
- Awareness of your own lens – Leaders must challenge their own assumptions, as the way something occurs to you is not how it occurs to others.

Words shape perception. Leaders can't always change the facts, but they can influence how those facts are understood through the language they use.

In complex, fast-moving environments, technical skill and logic are not enough. Today's leaders need phenomenological awareness – the ability to perceive how others are perceiving. When people feel seen and understood – not just in what they do, but in how they experience what's happening – trust grows. Engagement deepens. Change becomes possible. Results become extraordinary.

Phenomenology doesn't make leadership easier, but it does make it more human, and ultimately, more effective.

Metaphor: Walking Through the Forest

Think of leadership as walking through a dense forest. Most of the time, we are focused on getting to the other side – pushing through branches, watching the ground for roots, and keeping our eyes on the goal ahead. But phenomenology asks us to pause. To notice the sound of the birds, the smell of the earth, the feeling of light breaking through the canopy. By pausing to notice, we are no longer rushing blindly; we are present to the richness of the forest. Leadership, too, requires that pause: the capacity to notice our experience as we lead, not just the outcome we are trying to produce.

When leaders ignore this, they often fall into patterns of reaction. They push harder, demand more, but fail to see what is happening beneath the surface. Teams lose trust, organisations lose energy, and leaders lose perspective. When leaders adopt a phenomenological approach, they can move beyond mere reaction to genuine reflection. They can lead not from compulsion but from choice.

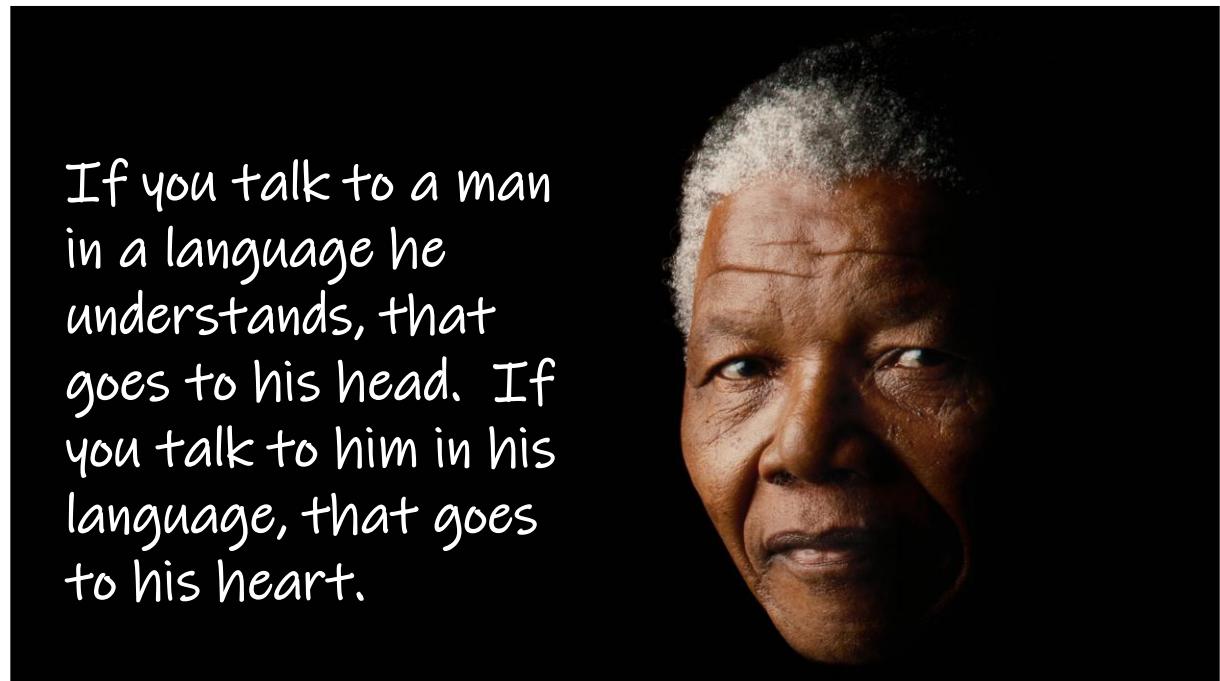
Case Study: Nelson Mandela (South Africa)

When Nelson Mandela walked free after 27 years of imprisonment, he faced a choice. Many expected anger and vengeance. Yet what Mandela chose was reconciliation. His presence carried a calm awareness of how every gesture, word, and silence would be experienced by his people and the world. This was phenomenology in action: a deep attentiveness to lived experience – his own and that of his nation.

Mandela often said, “Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies”. He knew that the way he experienced his imprisonment – not as wasted years, but as preparation – would shape the way he led. Emerging from Robben Island, he demonstrated that leaders do not just act on the world; they interpret it, reframe it, and thus reshape it.

A striking example came during the Rugby World Cup in 1995. Rugby had long been seen as a symbol of white minority privilege in South Africa. By wearing the Springbok jersey and publicly supporting the team, Mandela reframed the moment. He understood the symbolic power of how others experienced this act: it was not simply sport, but the possibility of a new, shared identity.

Mandela teaches us that leadership begins with how we experience reality. The ability to notice, to reinterpret, and to embody reconciliation rather than revenge is what made him extraordinary.

A close-up, black and white portrait of Nelson Mandela's face. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a gentle, contemplative expression. His skin is deeply wrinkled, and his hair is white and curly. The background is solid black, making his face stand out.

If you talk to a man
in a language he
understands, that
goes to his head. If
you talk to him in his
language, that goes
to his heart.

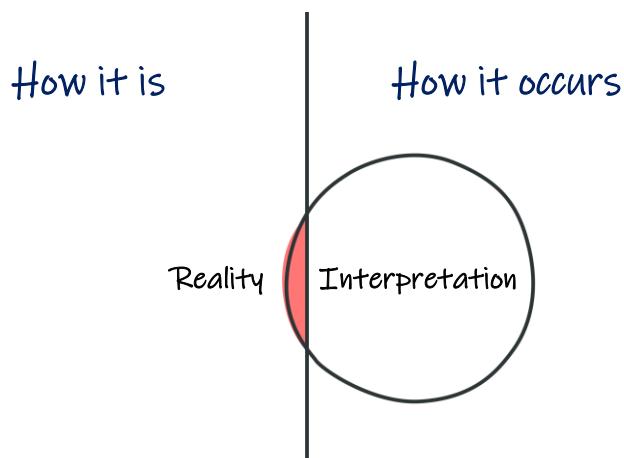
Model: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

To deepen this idea, we turn to hermeneutic phenomenology, as developed by thinkers like Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Hermeneutic phenomenology suggests that experience is always interpreted. We never encounter the world neutrally; we bring with us our history, culture, language, and identity. For leaders, this means acknowledging that we are never blank slates. We filter reality through our own lens, but by reflecting on those filters, we can expand them. We can learn to see more and differently.

Husserl introduced the concept of “bracketing” – the attempt to set aside assumptions in order to view experience anew. For leaders, this is the practice of pausing before reacting, asking: What assumptions am I making right now? Can I see this differently? Heidegger added that we are always “being-in-the-world”. Our decisions are never abstract; they are embedded in relationships, history, and culture. For leaders, this means decisions cannot be divorced from context. A choice in one organisation, culture, or moment may not be the right choice in another.

Gadamer emphasised dialogue as central to understanding. We make sense not in isolation, but in conversation with others’ perspectives. For leaders, this is a call to cultivate genuine dialogue – not token consultation, but genuine openness to being changed by what we hear. Dialogue is not about waiting to speak; it is about allowing meaning to emerge through conversation.

By weaving these insights together, hermeneutic phenomenology positions leadership as an interpretive act. Leaders do not simply “decide”; they interpret. They interpret the world, themselves, their teams, and the possibilities in front of them. The more conscious they are of that interpretive process, the more wisely they can act.



We often react to what we see or experience through our interpretation.

We don't respond to reality. We respond to how reality occurs to us.

Why This Matters

Leadership divorced from phenomenology risks becoming mechanical. It reduces people to roles and tasks, and experiences to data points. However, leadership informed by phenomenology is alive. It listens, senses, adapts. It acknowledges that leading is not just about what is done, but how it is experienced – by the leader and by those they lead.

Consider again Mandela's leadership. By attending to lived experience, he helped a nation feel united. That capacity is not about charisma; it is about presence. Every leader, in any context, can cultivate it. It requires slowing down, noticing, and making space for reflection. It requires asking not only "What needs to be done?" but also "How is this being experienced?".

Phenomenological leadership is not about withdrawing into endless reflection. It is about bringing richer awareness into action. When leaders notice their own experience and that of others, they can act with greater clarity, compassion, and courage. They can avoid the traps of reaction and instead respond with presence.

Practical Reflections for Leaders

To apply phenomenology in leadership:

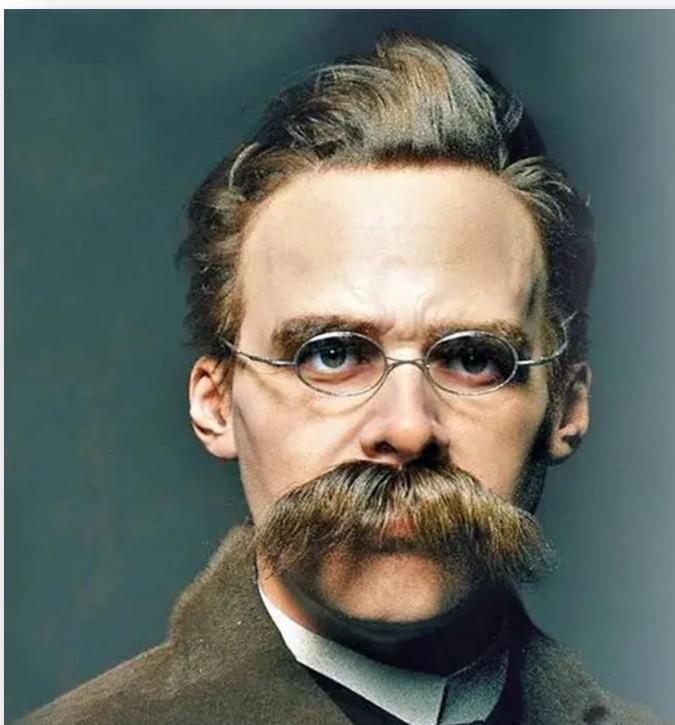
- Pause before acting. Notice what you are feeling and perceiving before you respond.
- Bracket assumptions. Ask: what assumptions am I making, and how might they limit my view?
- Attend to context. Remember that you are always leading within a web of history, culture, and relationships.
- Engage in dialogue. Invite others' perspectives not just to be heard but to shape understanding.
- Value presence. Recognise that showing up fully is often more powerful than having all the answers.

These are not abstract ideas but practical disciplines. Over time, they cultivate a kind of leadership that is less reactive, more grounded, and more deeply connected.

Write Your Own Chapter

- What lens are you using to view your most challenging situation right now – and how might it look different if you paused and noticed more fully?
- When you strip away titles and roles, what remains at the core of your leadership?
- How do others experience you differently from how you intend to be experienced?

- What foundation do you need to strengthen to lead with greater authenticity?



There are no facts,
only interpretations.

Frederick Nietzsche

Chapter 2

Ontology – The Nature of Being in Leadership

What if the biggest barrier to your leadership isn't what you do, but the way you are being?

If phenomenology is about how we experience the world, ontology takes us deeper – it asks who we are as we experience it. Ontology is the study of being – the nature of existence itself. In leadership, ontology explores not just what a leader does, but who the leader is being when they act. For leaders, this is not a theoretical luxury but a practical necessity. Every action we take arises from a sense of who we are. If that sense of being is narrow, fragile, or unexamined, then our leadership will reflect those limits. But if our sense of being is expansive, grounded, and self-aware, then our leadership can expand too.

Ontology challenges us to ask: *What does it mean to be a leader?* Not just to do leadership tasks, but to inhabit leadership as a way of being. This is a radical shift. It shifts the focus from external behaviour to internal presence. From “what am I doing?” to “what am I bringing into the space – consciously or unconsciously?”. Many leaders focus on what they must do – manage, plan, decide. Fewer reflect on how they are *being* as they do those things. Yet it is precisely that how of being that people experience most profoundly.

Most leaders have some form of a to-do list. How many do you know that have a to-be list?

Most leadership frameworks focus on what leaders do – setting vision, making decisions, managing performance. However, a deeper layer exists beneath action. It's not about behaviour or tactics. Who are you being – when you speak, decide, relate, and lead?

You've likely seen it before: two leaders say the same thing, but get wildly different results. The difference isn't what they said. It's who they were being when they said it:

- Being decisive versus being defensive.
- Being collaborative versus being controlling.
- Being trusting versus being transactional.

Ontology provides language for this subtle yet powerful domain of leadership. It helps leaders become aware of how their way of being shapes outcomes – often more than their skills or intentions.

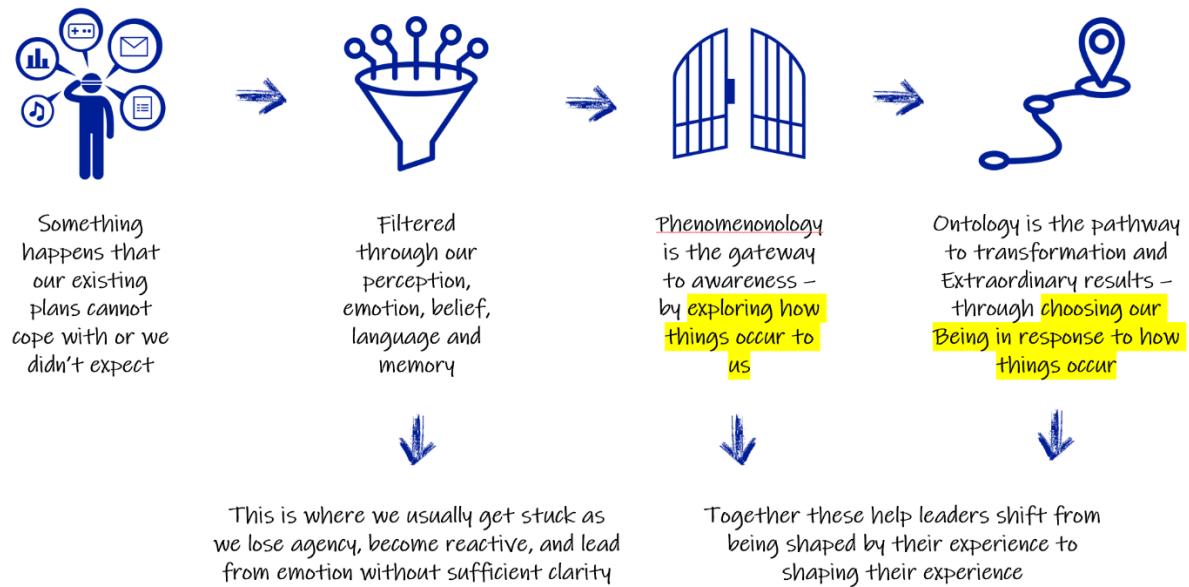
Ontological leadership development involves three key domains:

- Language – We live in language. The words we use don't just describe reality, they generate it. A leader's language creates context, shapes moods, and defines possibility.
- Emotions – These are not just reactions, and they are predispositions for action. A leader being resigned behaves very differently from one being committed.
- Body – Our posture, breath, and presence communicate long before we speak.

Ontology offers a fundamental shift. Instead of asking, what do I need to do to lead effectively? You ask, Who do I need to be, such that effective leadership becomes inevitable? This is the missing piece in many leadership programmes, a focus not just on doing more, but on being different. Because ultimately, you don't lead from your title. You lead from your presence.

We've all experienced a situation where something happens that our existing plans cannot cope with or we didn't expect. That experience gets filtered through our perception, emotion, belief, language and memory. This is where we usually get stuck as we lose agency, become reactive, and lead from emotion without sufficient clarity.

Phenomenonology is the gateway to awareness – by exploring how things occur to us. Ontology is the pathway to transformation and extraordinary results – through choosing our being in response to how things occur. Together, these help leaders shift from being shaped by their experience to shaping their experience.



Metaphor: The Container and the Water

Imagine yourself as a container and your actions as the water within it. No matter how much you try to change the water – add colour, stir it differently – it will always take the

shape of the container. Your being is that container. It shapes how your actions are expressed, how others experience you, and ultimately, the impact you have. To transform leadership, it is often not enough to change the water. We must reshape the container.

Case Study: Dame Whina Cooper (New Zealand)

Dame Whina Cooper stands as one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most profound examples of ontological leadership – leadership grounded not simply in doing, but in being. Born in 1895 in Northland, she was raised within Te Ao Māori, where leadership was inseparable from whakapapa (genealogy), whenua (land), and whānau (family). This cultural grounding gave her a deep sense that who she was – her identity, her being – mattered as much as what she did.

Her leadership journey was not defined by holding titles or formal authority, but by the way she embodied courage and responsibility throughout her long life. Dame Whina Cooper didn't lead because she held formal power. She led because of who she was being – an unshakable presence of dignity, courage, and commitment.

At 79 years old, she walked at the front of the 1975 Māori Land March, not because she had the physical capability, but because she embodied a deep, ancestral authority. Her being radiated fierce love for her people, an unwavering sense of justice, and a willingness to disrupt the status quo – without bitterness or blame.

She was not “doing” leadership. She “was” leadership – in voice, posture, and presence.

Ontology teaches that leadership lives in language, emotion, and body. Dame Whina’s words stirred a nation. Her tone evoked truth. Her presence could not be ignored. She reminds us that leadership is not reserved for the young, the appointed, or the resourced. It’s available to anyone willing to be something powerful – regardless of age, position, or opposition.

To lead like Dame Whina is to ask not just, “What should I do?”, but, “Who must I be, for something better to become possible?”.

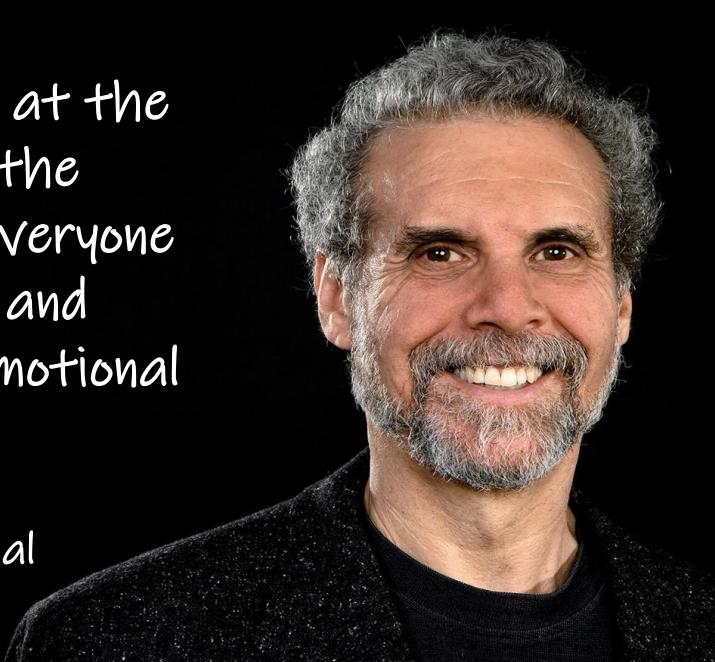
Model: Ontological Coaching

One of the most practical frameworks for exploring ontology in leadership comes from ontological coaching, pioneered by thinkers like Fernando Flores and Julio Olalla. Ontological coaching focuses on three domains of being: language, emotions, and body. Each domain shapes who we are and how we show up as leaders.

- Language – The words we use create worlds. They shape what we see as possible, what we commit to, and how others respond. For example, saying “this is impossible” closes futures; saying “let’s find a way” opens them. Leaders’ being is revealed in their language.
- Emotions – Our moods and emotions are not just private states; they are collective climates. A leader in resentment breeds cynicism; a leader in gratitude cultivates collaboration. Ontology asks us to notice: what emotional space am I bringing into this room?
- Body – Leadership is not just intellectual; it is embodied. Our posture, tone, and presence communicate far more than our words. A leader hunched in defeat conveys despair; a leader standing tall conveys possibility. Ontological coaching invites leaders to shift not just what they think, but how they inhabit their bodies.

Moods that start at the top tend to move the fastest because everyone watches the boss and they take their emotional cues from them.

Daniel Goleman – Primal Leadership



Ontological coaching argues that transformation requires shifts across these three domains simultaneously. A leader cannot simply change their language while staying trapped in fear or slumped in defeat. Nor can they change their body posture while continuing to use destructive language. Authentic transformation occurs when language, emotions, and body align in a new way of being.

For example, a leader who wants to move from controlling to empowering must not only change their language (“I trust you to decide”) but also their emotional stance (from fear to confidence) and their bodily presence (from tense to open). Only then will others experience the shift as real.

This model emphasises that leadership is not about techniques layered on top of unchanged being. It is about transforming the ground itself. Leaders who take ontology

seriously learn to notice and shift their patterns of language, emotion, and body. In doing so, they reshape their very being – and their leadership.

Why This Matters

Most leadership development focuses on skills and knowledge – what leaders *do*. Ontology asks us to focus on being – who leaders *are*. Without this, skills are shallow. A leader can learn to “delegate”, but if their being is rooted in distrust, their delegation will feel hollow. A leader can learn to “listen actively”, but if their being is impatient, their listening will not land. Skills without shifts in being produce inauthenticity.

By contrast, when leaders shift their being, new skills emerge naturally. A leader whose being is open will listen without technique. Oscar Trimboli says “great listeners change the way that people speak”. A leader whose being is confident will delegate with ease. A leader whose being is compassionate will inspire without effort. Ontology flips the script: rather than asking, “What do I need to do to lead better?” it asks, “Who must I be so that better leadership flows naturally?”.

What identity are you so committed to protecting that it limits your leadership?

Practical Reflections for Leaders

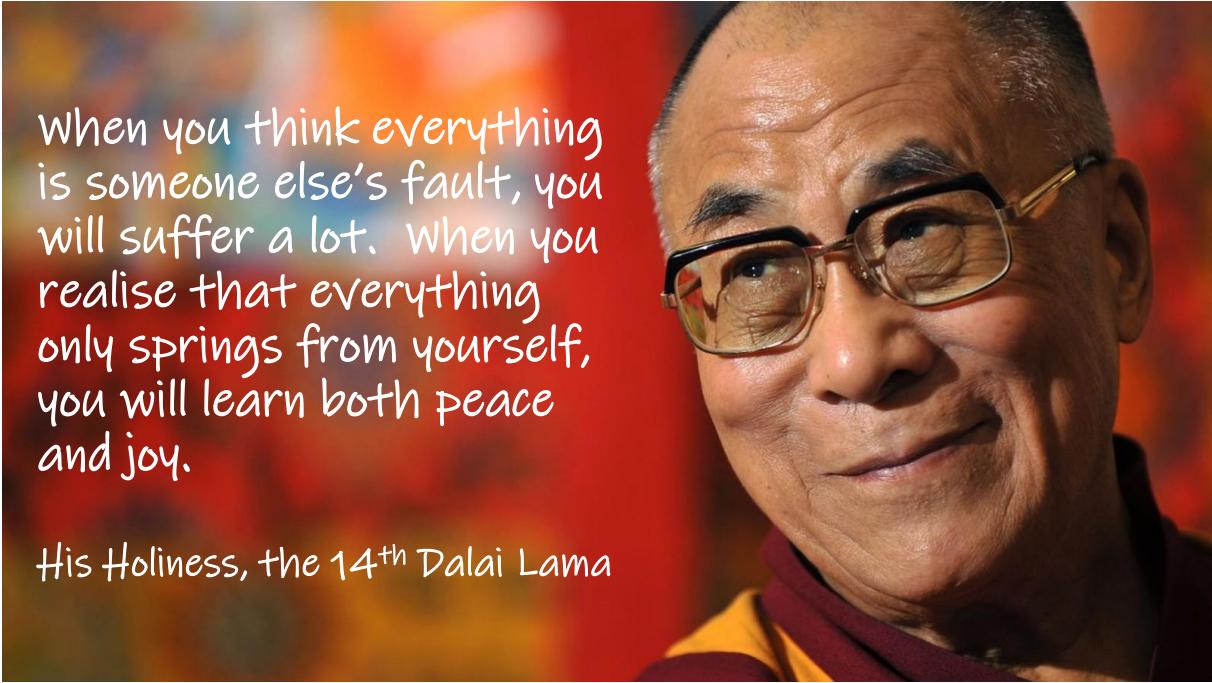
To explore ontology in leadership:

- Notice your language. What worlds or experiences are your words creating?
- Notice your emotions. What mood are you spreading in your team?
- Notice your body. How does your posture, tone, and presence affect others?
- Experiment with shifts. Try changing one domain and notice the ripple effects.
- Seek feedback. Ask others: how do you experience my presence? What way of being do I convey?

These practices are not cosmetic. They are ways of reshaping the container of being itself.

Write Your Own Chapter

- Who are you being as you lead, and how does that being shape everything you do?
- What aspects of your way of being open up possibilities for others – and what aspects close them down?
- How do you show up differently when you’re at your best versus when you’re under pressure?
- What is one shift in being you could experiment with this week?

A close-up portrait of the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. He is wearing his signature dark-rimmed glasses and a warm, gentle smile. He is dressed in a traditional maroon and yellow Tibetan Buddhist robe. The background is a soft-focus, warm-toned orange and yellow, suggesting a sunset or a ceremonial backdrop.

When you think everything
is someone else's fault, you
will suffer a lot. When you
realise that everything
only springs from yourself,
you will learn both peace
and joy.

His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama

Chapter 3

Identity – Interpreting the World Through the Self

What reality are you blind to because of the way the world occurs for you?

Leadership is never neutral. Every leader carries into their role the weight of their identity – who they believe themselves to be, the stories they tell about their past, the roles they inhabit, and the cultural forces that have shaped them. Identity acts as a filter, colouring what leaders see, how they interpret events, and the decisions they make. At its best, identity provides grounding and clarity. At its worst, it can become a cage, locking leaders into patterns that limit their growth and blind them to other possibilities.

In leadership, the crucial challenge is not to discard identity but to become aware of it, so we can work with it, stretch it, and at times transcend it.

Metaphor: The Glasses We Forget We're Wearing

Identity is like a pair of glasses. We don't notice we are wearing them, but everything we see is coloured by their tint. If the lenses are red, the world looks red; if they are blue, the world looks blue. The problem isn't that the glasses exist – they are necessary. The problem is that we forget we are wearing them. Leaders who are unaware of their glasses confuse their view with reality itself. Leaders who learn to notice their glasses gain the ability to take them off, change them, or at least recognise how they shape perception.

In other words, identity is never the whole truth. It is simply the lens through which we view truth.

Case Study: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia)

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's journey to becoming Africa's first elected female head of state is a striking example of identity re-authored in the service of leadership. Born in Liberia, she trained as an economist and rose through the ranks of international financial institutions. Yet her career was interrupted by exile after she spoke out against the military dictatorship. In those years abroad, she re-examined who she was – not just a technocrat, but a Liberian committed to freedom.

When she returned, her identity had shifted. She was no longer only an economist crunching numbers; she was an activist, a truth-teller, and ultimately a presidential candidate. By the time she was elected in 2005, Liberia was emerging from 14 years of civil war. The country was broken – socially, economically, spiritually. Sirleaf had to hold multiple identities at once: reformer, mother figure, negotiator with international powers, and symbol of a new possibility for African women.

Her story illustrates that identity is not fixed. It is shaped, fractured, and rewritten by experience. She often said that leadership required “courage where there is fear, reconciliation where there is conflict, and hope where there is despair”. Those words came from her lived experience of having to reinvent herself across contexts.

For leaders, Sirleaf’s life reminds us that identity can be both a foundation and a cage. We inherit aspects of identity that give us strength - education, values, traditions – but to lead into the future, we must be willing to stretch and sometimes even discard parts of that identity to become something new.

Model: Social Identity Theory

A useful framework for understanding identity in leadership is Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. The model suggests that individuals derive part of their sense of self from the groups they belong to – national, ethnic, professional, organisational, or even ideological. Our identity is not fixed solely in our individual psychology; it is also shaped by the groups we claim as “us” and those we perceive as “them”.

In leadership, this matters enormously:

- Leaders often serve as prototypical representatives of their group. Their identity is seen as symbolic of “who we are”.
- Leaders are judged not only on their personal traits but on how well they embody and serve the identity of their group.
- Group identity creates cohesion, but it can also create blind spots, reinforcing in-group bias and hostility toward outsiders.

Social Identity Theory explains why leaders sometimes rise less because of their competence and more because they embody what their group values at that moment. For example, a business may promote a leader who exemplifies its entrepreneurial identity, even if others are technically more qualified. Similarly, in times of crisis, groups often elevate leaders who embody resilience and courage, because those qualities resonate with the identity the group needs to survive.

The model also warns us: when leaders overly identify with a single group identity, they risk excluding or alienating others. This dynamic can play out in organisations where “we in headquarters” are favoured over “them in the field”, or in political settings where national identity is defined in narrow terms that exclude minorities.

Effective leaders recognise the power of group identity but work to expand its boundaries. They ask: *Who counts as “us”?* *Who have we left out?* By broadening the definition of the group, leaders can expand the possibilities of identity itself.

Identity as Limiting and Liberating

Identity is double-edged. It can:

- Anchor us. Our identity connects us to heritage, values, and purpose.
- Blind us. Our identity can filter out what doesn't fit our narrative, leaving us stuck.
- Expand us. When we examine and stretch our identity, it can become a source of transformation.

For leaders, the danger is living only inside the first two. Anchoring and blinding often go together. A leader who strongly identifies as “the expert” may anchor their confidence in knowledge but also blind themselves to the value of collaboration. A leader who identifies as “the fixer” may always rush to solve problems but never empower others to do so.

The liberating potential comes when leaders realise, they are not only the roles they play. They can author new stories of identity. They can be both strong and kind. They can be expert and learner. They can be decisive and humble. Identity becomes not a prison but a palette.



Practical Reflections for Leaders

1. Map your identity. Write down the roles you inhabit – parent, manager, citizen, friend. Ask how each role shapes your leadership.
2. Notice your lenses. When you react strongly, ask: what part of my identity feels threatened here?
3. Expand the “we”. Consider who is excluded from your sense of group identity. How could you expand the circle?
4. Re-author your story. Choose one limiting identity story (I’m always the rescuer) and write a new one (I’m also a teacher who equips others to rescue themselves).
5. Balance pride with humility. Identity gives strength when celebrated but becomes dangerous when it blinds. Practice honouring your heritage while staying open to growth.

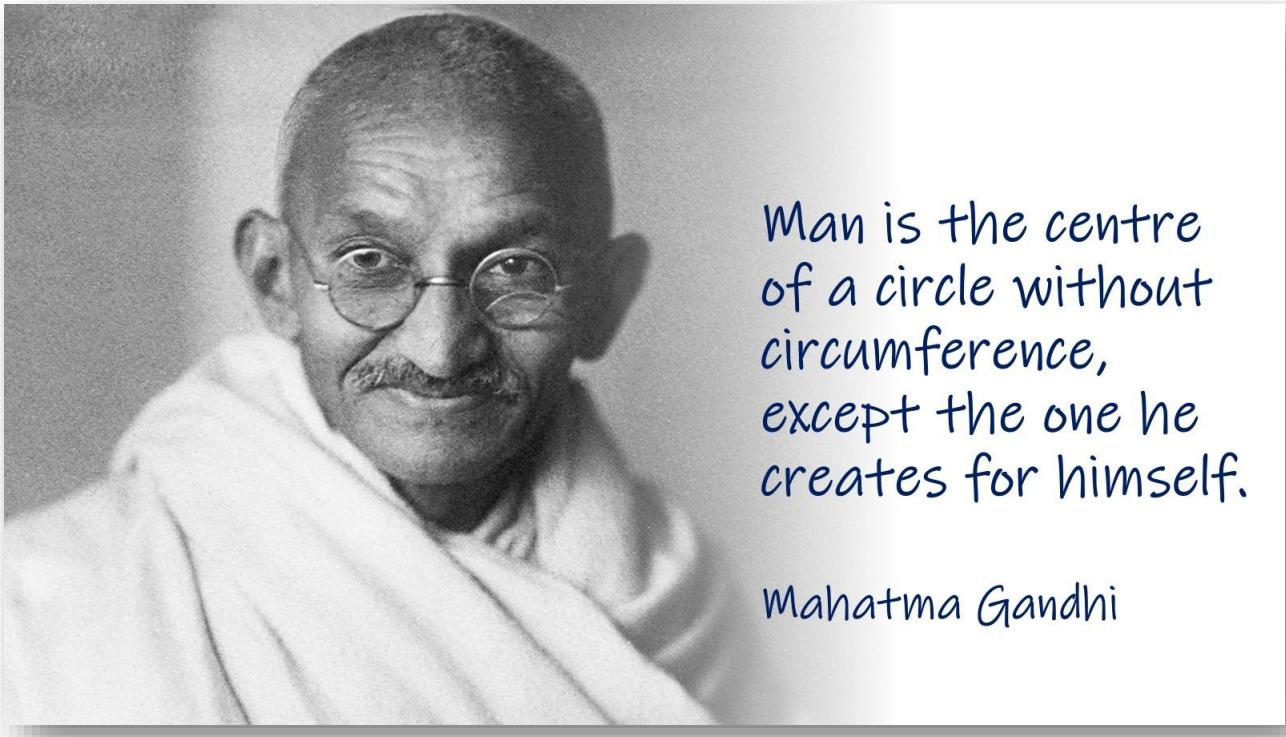
Why This Matters

Leadership divorced from identity is impossible. Leaders cannot step outside themselves and lead as if they were neutral actors. But leaders also cannot be imprisoned by identity. The task is to develop the capacity to see identity clearly, work with it consciously, and stretch it creatively.

The leaders who make the greatest difference are often those who redefined what leadership could look like. Gandhi as the ascetic liberator. Mandela as the reconciler. Each did not abandon identity, but they transformed it into a new story. In doing so, they invited others to reimagine their own.

Write Your Own Chapter

- What stories of identity are shaping your leadership – and which ones are you ready to rewrite?
- What situations do you consistently interpret as threats or problems?
- How might those same situations occur differently to someone else?
- What reframing could help you see opportunities instead of constraints?



Man is the centre
of a circle without
circumference,
except the one he
creates for himself.

Mahatma Gandhi

Chapter 4

Preconditioned Behaviours – Invisible Scripts That Hold Leaders Back

Which way of being do you default to when the pressure rises – and what would shift if you chose differently?

Leadership is not just about what we know or even who we believe ourselves to be. Much of our behaviour flows from scripts that run beneath awareness – patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting laid down over years of repetition. These preconditioned behaviours are like grooves in the brain. They are efficient, automatic, and often invisible. However, they can also be limiting, trapping leaders in cycles that no longer serve them.

True growth requires surfacing these hidden scripts, questioning their origin, and choosing whether to keep them, rewrite them, or let them go.

Metaphor: The Elephant and the Rider

The psychologist Jonathan Haidt offers a powerful metaphor: the elephant and the rider. The rider represents our rational mind – logical, deliberate, seemingly in control. The elephant represents our emotional and automatic systems – large, powerful, and often determining the real direction of travel.

Leaders often assume the rider is in charge, but it is the elephant that dictates most behaviour. If the elephant is conditioned to move in a certain direction, no amount of reasoning by the rider will easily change its course. Preconditioned behaviours are the pathways the elephant knows, and unless we attend to them, the elephant keeps walking them, no matter the leader's conscious intentions.

Case Study: Satya Nadella (India/United States, Microsoft)

When Satya Nadella took over as CEO of Microsoft in 2014, the company was at risk of irrelevance. Its culture had become insular and combative. Managers were rewarded for defending their turf, rather than collaborating across divisions. Employees

described the environment as “know-it-all”, where the smartest person in the room won, even if the organisation lost.

Nadella recognised that the greatest obstacle wasn’t technology, but the company’s almost preconditioned behaviours. To survive and thrive, Microsoft didn’t need more strategy decks or process changes; it needed a cultural reset. Nadella turned to a deceptively simple idea: shifting from a “know-it-all” to a “learn-it-all” culture. Drawing inspiration from Carol Dweck’s research on growth mindset, he framed learning and curiosity as the new standard for leadership.

He modelled it personally. In meetings, instead of dominating with answers, Nadella asked questions. He encouraged vulnerability, including speaking openly about how raising his son with special needs had reshaped his view of empathy. He repeated the phrase “empathy makes you a better innovator”, signalling that leadership was not about control but connection.

The results were dramatic. Within five years, Microsoft regained its place as one of the world’s most valuable companies. More importantly, employees began to describe the culture as one where collaboration and curiosity thrived. The strategic pivots to cloud computing and AI would have been impossible without first dismantling the old behavioural traps.

Nadella’s story reminds us that organisations often carry invisible scripts – ingrained habits of thought and behaviour that limit growth. Leaders don’t change those scripts by issuing commands; they change them by embodying a different way of being.

Model: The Ladder of Inference

One of the most practical models for surfacing preconditioned behaviours is the Ladder of Inference, introduced by Chris Argyris and later popularised by Peter Senge. The model describes the mental process by which we move, often unconsciously, from observing data to taking action.

The steps typically look like this:

1. Observe data – raw information or events.
2. Select data – we pay attention to certain aspects and ignore others.
3. Add meaning – based on culture, identity, and prior experiences.
4. Make assumptions – drawing on those meanings.
5. Form conclusions – deciding what the data “really means”.
6. Adopt beliefs – integrating conclusions into our worldview.
7. Take action – behaving in ways consistent with those beliefs.

The Ladder of Inference is critical because it shows how quickly leaders move from reality to interpretation to action, often without recognising the steps in between. For example, a manager notices a team member arriving late. They select that data, attach

meaning (they don't respect the team), make an assumption (they're disengaged), draw a conclusion (they don't care), adopt a belief (this person isn't reliable), and act (I won't give them important work).

All of this can happen in seconds and entirely without conscious thought. The behaviour that follows – ignoring the team member, withholding opportunities – may feel like simple common sense. But it is not. It is a conditioned script built on layers of unnoticed interpretation.

For leaders, the Ladder of Inference explains why preconditioned behaviours are so sticky: they feel like the truth. Surfacing the ladder allows leaders to question each rung: What data did I select? What meaning did I add? What assumptions are driving me? By stepping down the ladder, leaders can recondition their elephants.

How Preconditioned Behaviours Limit Leaders

1. Repetition of past patterns. Leaders may unconsciously replicate the style of authority figures from their past – such as parents, teachers, or early bosses – regardless of their current relevance.
2. Defaulting under stress. In moments of pressure, people often revert to automatic habits, which are often the least helpful ones.
3. Blind spots in perception. Preconditioned behaviours filter what leaders even notice, leaving them unaware of alternative perspectives.
4. Resistance to growth. When leaders are deeply invested in familiar patterns, they may interpret challenges to them as personal threats.

These invisible scripts quietly shape cultures. A leader with a habit of controlling every detail conditions a culture of dependency. A leader with a habit of avoiding conflict breeds avoidance in others. In this way, preconditioned behaviours ripple far beyond the individual.

Shifting the Pattern

Breaking free from limiting scripts requires deliberate practice:

- Awareness. Notice the trigger-response cycles you fall into. Keep a journal of repeated reactions.
- Inquiry. Use the Ladder of Inference to ask: what assumptions underlie my behaviour?
- Experimentation. Try small shifts. If your habit is to dominate meetings, experiment with speaking last.
- Feedback. Invite others to name the patterns they see in you – because elephants are often invisible to their riders.

- Compassion. Remember, these patterns once served you. The goal is not to judge yourself, but to determine whether they are still relevant today.

A Broader Perspective: Neuroscience and Habit

Neuroscience confirms what models like the Ladder of Inference suggest: the brain is wired for efficiency. Habits create neural pathways that, once formed, require little energy to activate. That is why breaking them feels so hard – the brain literally prefers the well-worn path.

Yet neuroscience also offers hope: through neuroplasticity, new pathways can be created. Consistent practice of new behaviours literally rewires the brain. Leaders are not forever trapped by their conditioning. With intention and repetition, they can cultivate new defaults.

Practical Reflections for Leaders

1. Name your elephant. Identify one habitual behaviour that consistently shows up under stress.
2. Track the ladder. Next time it happens, map your Ladder of Inference step by step.
3. Create a pause. Insert a deliberate breath or count of three before acting in familiar patterns.
4. Choose an alternative. Experiment with one new behaviour in that situation.
5. Celebrate small wins. Reinforcing even minor shifts helps recondition the elephant.

Why This Matters

Leadership is rarely limited by a lack of intelligence or skill. More often, it is limited by unexamined patterns. Preconditioned behaviours keep leaders repeating the past, even when the future demands something new.

What story of failure are you still carrying as a shield rather than a stepping stone?

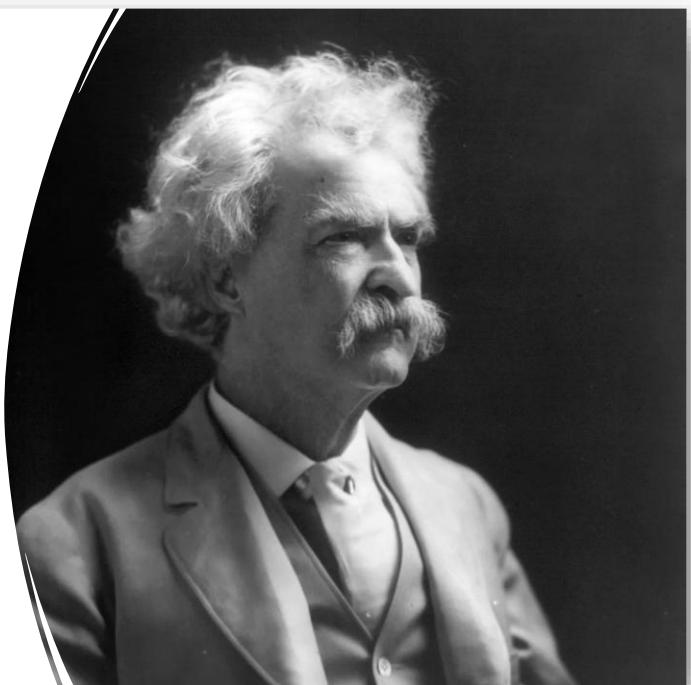
The leaders who stand out are not those with flawless conditioning but those willing to surface, question, and shift their patterns. They understand that the elephant is powerful, but not immutable. They learn to guide it with patience, awareness, and practice.

Write Your Own Chapter

- What preconditioned behaviours are shaping your leadership – and which of them are you ready to recondition?
- Which of ways of being do you most often default to?
- How does that default way limit the results you create?
- What new possibilities might open if you deliberately chose a different way of being?

It ain't what you
don't know that
gets you into
trouble. It's
what you know
for sure that just
ain't so.

Mark Twain



Chapter 5

Identity and Leadership – Beyond the Mask We Wear

What story about yourself are you living without even realising it?

Leadership is never neutral. Each of us leads out of who we are – our history, culture, values, and sense of self. That is both the gift and the challenge of leadership. The gift is authenticity: when leaders embrace their identity, they bring clarity and conviction. The challenge is limitation: when leaders are trapped by their identity, they reduce what is possible.

Identity can function like a mask. It shapes how others see us and how we see ourselves. Masks can be empowering – projecting confidence, competence, authority. However, they can also become cages. If we never remove the mask, we forget the face beneath. True leadership development means learning to see identity clearly, honouring its role, and moving beyond it when it limits our growth.

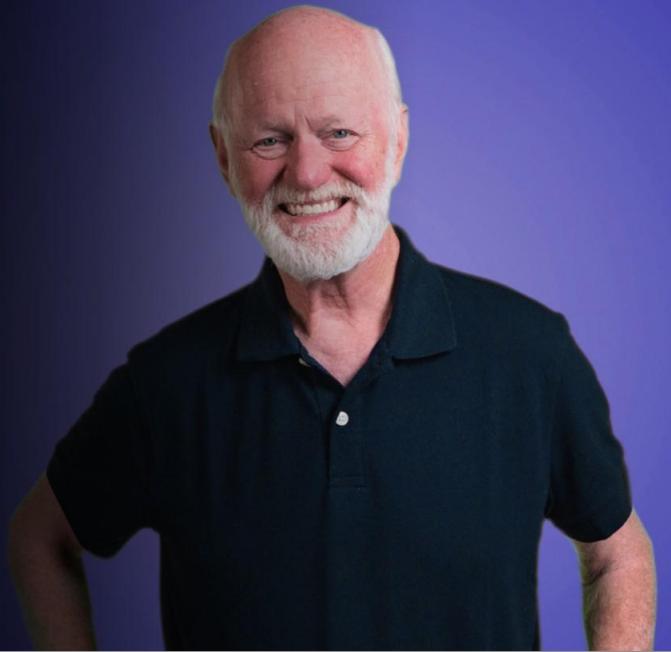
Metaphor: The River and Its Banks

Imagine identity as the banks of a river. The banks give the river shape, direction, and momentum. Without banks, the water would spread aimlessly. But if the banks are too rigid or narrow, the river floods or stagnates. Leadership identity works the same way. It channels our energy, provides boundaries, and enables flow. However, if we cling to identity too tightly – “This is just who I am” – we risk constraining the river’s course.

Great leaders learn to reshape the banks when needed, to widen them, or even to redirect the flow. Identity is not destiny. It is design, and design can evolve.

What got you
here won't get
you there

Marshall Goldsmith



Case Study: Indra Nooyi (India/United States, PepsiCo)

Indra Nooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo, offers a compelling example of how identity both shapes and stretches leadership. Born and raised in Chennai, India, she came to the United States for graduate study and eventually rose to become one of the most powerful business leaders in the world. Throughout her journey, her identity as an immigrant, a woman of colour, and a mother was never separate from her leadership – it both defined her and at times limited how others perceived her.

When she took over as CEO in 2006, PepsiCo faced growing criticism about the health impact of its products. Rather than simply defend the status quo, Nooyi reframed the company's identity. She launched the "Performance with Purpose" strategy, positioning PepsiCo not only as a snack and soda company but as a leader in sustainability, health-conscious innovation, and social responsibility. Her own lived identity – someone who bridged cultures and perspectives – helped her see possibilities others overlooked.

Yet she also confronted the mask of identity: critics who questioned her leadership style, or who stereotyped her as "too tough" or "too soft" depending on the moment. Nooyi navigated these tensions by integrating multiple aspects of her identity – global

citizen, strategist, mother, innovator – and inviting PepsiCo to evolve its own collective identity in the process.

Her story shows that leadership identity is not static; it can be widened. By refusing to be confined by narrow expectations of gender, culture, or role, Nooyi helped re-author what corporate leadership could mean in the 21st century.

Model: Possible Selves Theory (Markus & Nurius)

Possible Selves Theory suggests that our identity is not only about who we believe we are today but also about the “selves” we imagine we might become in the future – both desired selves (who we want to be) and feared selves (who we hope to avoid). These imagined identities shape motivation, decision-making, and leadership style.

Leaders who are overly anchored in their current identity can get stuck, leading only from who they have been rather than who they could be.

Leaders who engage with their possible selves open up new pathways for growth, courage, and transformation.

The feared self is just as powerful: many leaders avoid conflict, risk, or vulnerability because they fear becoming a version of themselves they don’t respect.

The model suggests the following applications:

- Vision and Growth – Leaders who consciously define their “possible self” as a visionary, a mentor, or a systems-changer are more likely to take steps that align with that emerging identity.
- Resilience – When setbacks occur, recalling the desired self sustains perseverance. For example, Nelson Mandela’s possible self as a reconciler sustained him through decades in prison.
- Avoiding Traps – Naming the feared self (e.g., the controlling boss or the burned-out leader) allows leaders to notice behaviours pulling them toward it and take corrective action.
- Reflection Practices – Write two identity stories: “The leader I most want to become” and “The leader I most fear becoming”. Identify the habits and narratives that pull you toward each. Use this as a compass when making decisions. Ask: Does this choice align me with my desired self or my feared self?

How Identity Shapes Leadership

1. Interpretation of events. Our identity filters meaning. A leader who identifies primarily as a competitor may interpret a market shift as threat; one who identifies as a collaborator may see opportunity.

2. Relationships with others. Leaders favour those who affirm their identity and distance themselves from those who challenge it.
3. Decision-making. Identity drives risk appetite. A leader who sees themselves as a “caretaker” may avoid bold decisions. One who sees themselves as a “pioneer” may embrace them.
4. Responses to feedback. Criticism of performance often feels like criticism of self, making it hard to learn.

Shifting Beyond Limiting Identities

Identity does not disappear, but it can evolve. Leaders who grow beyond limitations often practice:

- Awareness. Naming the masks they wear. “I am seen as the tough one,” or “I am known for empathy”.
- Detachment. Recognising identity as a role, not essence. “I lead with empathy” is different from “I am empathy”.
- Integration. Adding new dimensions. The engineer learns to lead as strategist. The empathetic leader learns to act as commander.
- Fluidity. Choosing which identity to bring forward in different contexts.

A Broader Perspective: Identity and Culture

In collectivist cultures, leadership identity often emerges from group membership and continuity. In individualist cultures, it often emerges from differentiation and uniqueness. Neither is better; both can constrain. The challenge for leaders is to notice when cultural identity is shaping their options – and whether that identity still serves the moment.

Practical Reflections for Leaders

1. Ask: Who am I when I lead? Write down the words others most often use to describe your leadership.
2. Notice the cage. Which of these identities feel confining? Which create expectations you no longer want to fulfil?
3. Experiment with expansion. Try on a different mask. If you are known for decisiveness, practice curiosity. If you are known for empathy, practice firmness.
4. Seek diverse mirrors. Invite feedback from people outside your primary in-groups. They will see parts of you that your group cannot.

Why This Matters

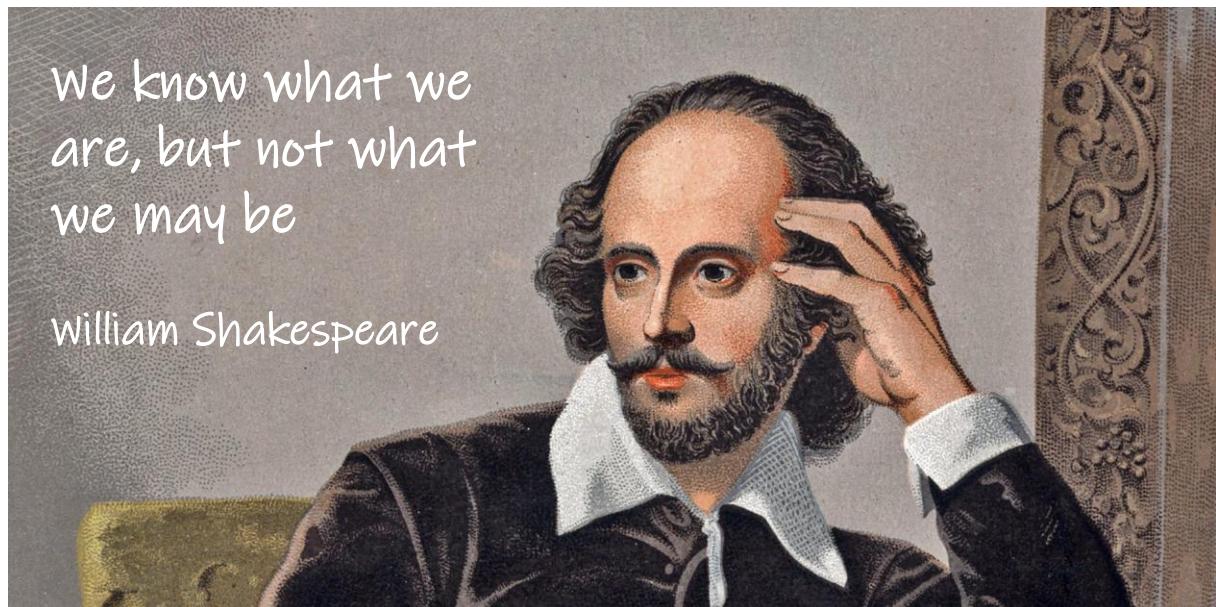
Leadership identity is never just personal; it shapes culture. When leaders refuse to examine their identity, organisations inherit their blind spots. When leaders courageously evolve identity, organisations expand what they imagine possible.

Which mask do you refuse to give up – even if it is costing your effectiveness?

The question is not whether identity shapes leadership. It always does. The question is whether leaders will allow identity to be a mask that cages them, or a riverbank they can reshape to serve a wider future.

Write Your Own Chapter

- Which parts of your leadership identity empower you – and which parts confine you?
- What is the dominant story you tell yourself about who you are as a leader?
- Who benefits from you keeping that story alive – and who pays the price?
- What story about yourself would you need to release to lead more powerfully?



Chapter 6

Preconditioned Behaviours – Breaking Free from the Invisible Scripts

What if failure isn't proof of your limits, but the raw material of your breakthrough?

One of the most insidious barriers to leadership growth is not the obvious external challenge but the silent, preconditioned behaviours that run like background software in our minds. These are the patterns we hardly notice: the ways we respond under stress, the assumptions we carry into decisions, the habits that feel so natural they become invisible.

These behaviours are often inherited – from family, culture, or professional training. They help us survive, achieve, and fit in. However, over time, they can harden into autopilot responses that no longer serve us. The challenge for leaders is that these invisible scripts often dictate action more powerfully than conscious choice.

A leader may believe they are acting freely, but when examined closely, they are simply replaying well-rehearsed responses: avoiding conflict because “keeping the peace” was rewarded in childhood, overworking because “busyness equals worth” was drilled in early career, or resisting delegation because “if you want it done right, do it yourself” was modelled by mentors.

The great paradox is this: the very patterns that made us successful in one stage of leadership can become constraints in the next.

Metaphor: The Well-Worn Path

Picture a field with tall grass. The first time you cross it, you must push the grass aside, uncertain of the best way through. The second time, the path is a little clearer. By the tenth time, a track is well worn. By the hundredth, it feels like the only way across the field.

Preconditioned behaviours are like that well-worn path. They save effort, they feel efficient, and they give us certainty. But they also blind us to other possible routes. Growth requires the courage to step off the familiar track and walk into the tall grass again.

Case Study: Akira Kurosawa (Japan)

Akira Kurosawa, one of the most influential filmmakers in history, is often remembered for cinematic masterpieces such as *Seven Samurai* and *Rashomon*. His artistry not only shaped Japanese cinema but also influenced Western storytelling, inspiring directors such as George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg. Yet, behind the acclaim lies a story of repeated rejection, deep personal struggle, and reframing failure into a breakthrough.

By the 1960s, Kurosawa had achieved international recognition, but the tides of film production in Japan shifted dramatically. Younger directors were seen as the voice of the new generation, while Kurosawa – viewed as “too Western” by some in Japan – struggled to secure backing for his projects. His 1970 epic *Dodes’ka-den* flopped at the box office, leaving him humiliated and bankrupt. The weight of rejection culminated in a personal crisis, and in 1971 Kurosawa attempted suicide. It could have been the end of his story, a genius silenced by failure. Instead, what followed became one of the most remarkable comebacks in the history of art.

Kurosawa reframed his failures as a crucible. When no Japanese studios would hire him, he turned to foreign studios. Soviet producers gave him the chance to make *Dersu Uzala* (1975), which went on to win the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Later, with backing from American directors he had inspired, he created *Kagemusha* and *Ran*, monumental works that restored his reputation and cemented his legacy. His resilience revealed that failure need not define a leader; it can be re-authored into a breakthrough if approached with imagination and courage.

Kurosawa’s story echoes lessons from the business world. Take Toyota, for example. In the aftermath of the 1973 oil shocks, the company faced soaring costs and declining competitiveness compared to American automakers. Rather than collapse under pressure, Toyota pioneered lean manufacturing and the Toyota Production System – innovations that turned constraint into efficiency and failure into a platform for global dominance.

Both Kurosawa and Toyota demonstrate the same truth: when leaders encounter crisis, they have a choice. They can treat failure as final, or they can reframe it into a lens for reinvention. Leadership at its core is not about avoiding hardship, but about turning hardship into the soil of renewal.

Model: Kegan’s Stages of Adult Development

Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan offers a powerful lens for understanding preconditioned behaviours: his Constructive-Developmental Theory, which maps how adults grow through successive stages of meaning-making.

- Socialised Mind: At this stage, people are largely shaped by external expectations. Behaviours are preconditioned by family, culture, or authority figures. Leaders here may be highly loyal, but they struggle with independent thinking.
- Self-Authoring Mind: Here, leaders step back from external conditioning and develop their own frameworks of values and principles. They become authors of their own beliefs and are less driven by inherited scripts.
- Self-Transforming Mind: At this highest stage, leaders see even their own frameworks as partial and open to revision. They become aware of the hidden assumptions underlying behaviour and can flexibly adapt across contexts.

Kegan's model reveals why preconditioned behaviours are so persistent. For many leaders, the Socialised Mind is reinforced by decades of success: doing what authority expects brings reward. However, when the context shifts – when complexity increases, and innovation demands experimentation – the old scripts falter. Given what is happening in the world today, how much of your past behaviours or mindset is actually relevant?

Leaders at the Self-Authoring Mind stage notice these scripts. They develop the capacity to ask, "Is this behaviour serving me, or simply repeating the past?". For example, a leader who always avoids conflict may begin to see how that script prevents honest dialogue. By reframing, they can choose differently.

At the Self-Transforming Mind stage, leaders not only question old scripts, but they also hold their own frameworks lightly. They recognise that even their hard-won principles may be another form of conditioning. This flexibility allows them to navigate paradox, ambiguity, and competing demands without defaulting to rigid patterns.

Kegan's insight is both sobering and liberating: most leaders plateau at the Socialised or Self-Authoring Mind. Moving toward the Self-Transforming Mind requires deliberate effort. However, the payoff is immense: the freedom to choose new responses rather than remain trapped in invisible scripts.

How Preconditioned Behaviours Show Up in Leadership

1. Conflict avoidance – Leaders who default to smoothing over tensions undermine accountability.
2. Perfectionism – Leaders who cannot tolerate mistakes inhibit experimentation and innovation.
3. Control – Leaders who struggle to delegate throttle the growth of their teams.
4. Over-responsibility – Leaders who carry everyone else's burdens risk burnout and disempowerment of others.
5. Risk aversion – Leaders who always play it safe miss transformative opportunities.

Each of these behaviours makes sense in its origin. Conflict avoidance might once have kept the peace in a volatile home. Perfectionism might once have ensured early career success. However, when carried forward unexamined, they quietly sabotage leadership potential and organisational success.

Shifting Beyond Limiting Scripts

Breaking free requires both awareness and practice:

- Identify your scripts. Notice recurring behaviours under pressure. Ask: Where did this come from? Whose voice is this really?
- Interrupt the pattern. In moments of stress, pause before acting. Ask: What else could I do right now?
- Experiment with alternatives. If your default is control, practice delegation. If your default is caution, try a calculated risk.
- Reflect with others. Invite trusted colleagues to name the behaviours they see you repeat. Often others notice what you cannot. Those are our blind spots.
- Anchor in purpose. Replace preconditioned behaviours with responses aligned to your deepest values, not your oldest habits.

Broader Perspective: Organisational Scripts

It is not only individuals who inherit scripts, organisations do too. Invisible habits can govern entire companies: “We never challenge the boss”, “We always prioritise efficiency over creativity”, and “We don’t talk about failure”. You’ve heard it before – it’s just the way we do things around here.

Leaders who break their own preconditioned patterns are better able to notice and shift these organisational scripts. Just as individuals can move from the Socialised Mind to the Self-Transforming Mind, so too can organisations evolve from rigid routines to adaptive cultures.

Practical Reflections for Leaders

1. List your defaults. Under stress, what do you do without thinking?
2. Ask origin questions. Who taught you that behaviour? When did it first serve you?
3. Test alternatives. In a safe setting, deliberately choose the opposite behaviour.
4. Notice outcomes. Did the world collapse – or did something new become possible?
5. Repeat until flexible. The goal is not to destroy the old path, but to add new ones, so you can choose.

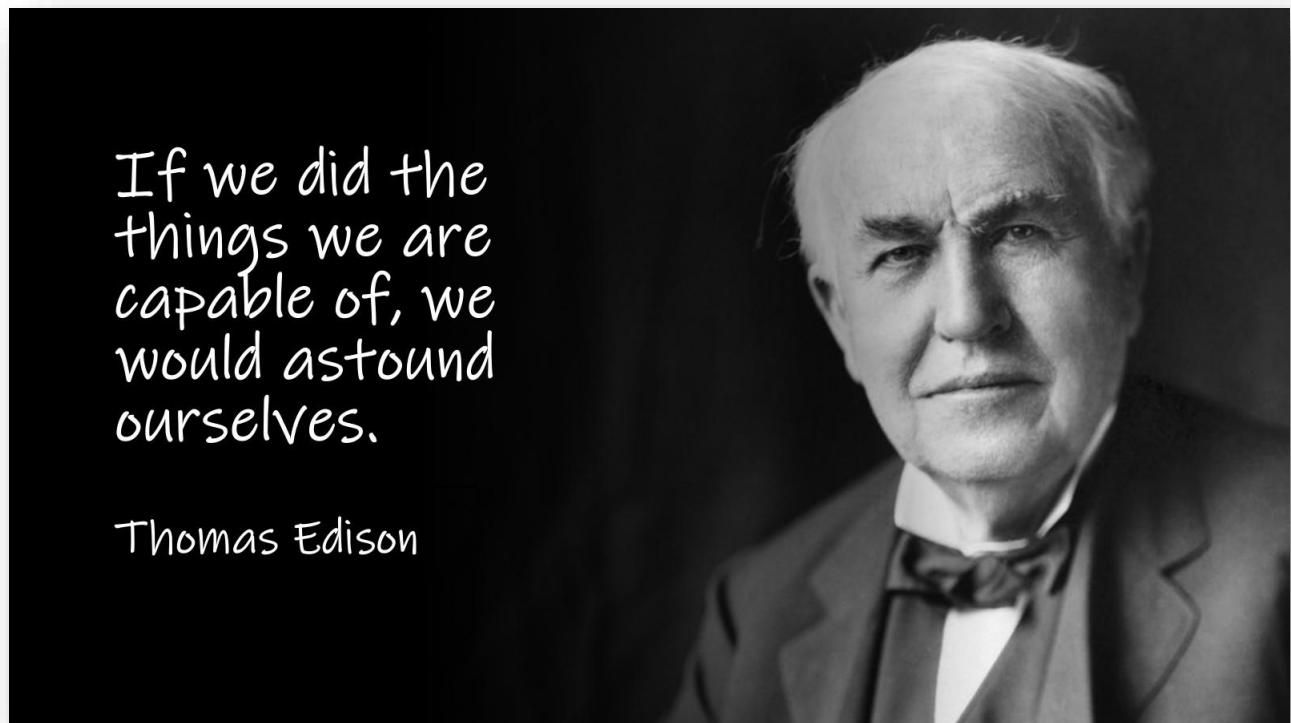
Why This Matters

The greatest enemy of leadership growth is not incompetence but autopilot. Leaders who remain captive to invisible scripts cannot see new possibilities. However, those who break free create space for innovation, courage, and transformation.

As Mandela showed, stepping off the well-worn path is rarely easy. It requires discomfort, humility, and practice. However, it is the only way to lead into futures that do not look like the past.

Write Your Own Chapter

- Which of your default behaviours once served you well, but now hold you back, and what new script might you choose instead?
- How do you currently define failure?
- Which past failures later turned out to be stepping stones for growth?
- How might you approach your next challenge differently if you saw failure as essential to mastery?



Chapter 7

Courageous Leadership – Moving Beyond Fear

What would you attempt if you trusted courage to carry you before competence caught up?

If identity and preconditioned behaviours are the invisible architecture of leadership, then courage is the fuel that allows us to step beyond their limits. Without courage, even the most insightful leader remains stuck. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the decision to act in alignment with purpose despite fear.

Leadership always involves risk: the risk of failure, the risk of rejection, the risk of making the wrong call. Yet what distinguishes extraordinary leaders from competent ones is not that they avoid fear, but that they expand their capacity to move with it. They treat fear as information rather than instruction or limitation.

Think of courage as the bridge between insight and action. We may have studied phenomenology, reflected on our identity, and uncovered the invisible scripts that hold us back. However, until we summon the courage to act differently, the insights remain abstractions. Courage transforms “knowing” into “doing”.

Metaphor: The Torch in the Tunnel

Imagine walking through a dark tunnel. Fear is the darkness pressing in on you, whispering that you should turn back. Courage is the torch you carry – not because it removes the tunnel, but because it gives you just enough light to keep moving forward. The torch does not eliminate uncertainty, but it illuminates the next few steps.

Leaders with courage do not wait for the tunnel to brighten on its own; they strike the flame themselves. They accept that visibility is partial, that they may stumble, and that they cannot guarantee a perfect outcome. Yet they keep moving forward, step by step, holding the torch aloft so others can follow.

If your vision feels safe, is it really a vision – or just a projection of the present?

Case Study: Wangari Maathai (Kenya)

Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, lived at the intersection of ecology, democracy, and human dignity. Her story exemplifies how leaders who see beyond conventional categories can ignite movements that transform both landscapes and lives.

In the 1970s, Kenya was grappling with deforestation, soil erosion, and the disempowerment of rural communities, particularly women. Maathai saw what others ignored: that environmental degradation was directly tied to poverty, inequality, and political oppression. Rather than treat these as separate issues, she integrated them into a single movement – the Green Belt Movement.

What began with women planting trees in their communities became a sweeping initiative that restored degraded land, improved food security, and gave rural women new agency. But the trees were never just about the environment; they became a symbol of resistance to authoritarian rule. As Maathai often said, “When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and hope”.

Her work brought her into direct conflict with President Daniel Arap Moi’s government. She endured harassment, imprisonment, and smear campaigns, yet she refused to separate ecological healing from the healing of democracy. By empowering ordinary people, especially women, to care for their environment, she reframed leadership itself. She showed that leadership is not about command and control, but about creating conditions for people to reclaim their dignity and agency.

The Nobel Committee recognised this unique synthesis in 2004 when it awarded her the Peace Prize, citing her “contribution to sustainable development, democracy, and peace”. In effect, Maathai redefined what leadership could mean in Africa and globally: a leadership that transcends silos, integrates identity with environment, and demonstrates that restoring the land can also restore the people.

From a leadership perspective, Maathai’s life illustrates the courage to act on interconnectedness. She saw that the greatest barriers were not just political or environmental, but conceptual – the entrenched separation of “environment” from “society”. Leaders in business, government, or communities often compartmentalise issues, treating them as if they exist in isolation. Maathai’s genius was to integrate them, to see that dignity, ecology, and democracy are braided together.

Her leadership reminds us that systemic change requires seeing patterns where others see fragments. She was both phenomenological – attending to how people experienced their daily struggles – and ontological – insisting on the deeper dignity of being human. By linking identity (women as agents of change) with behaviours (tree planting as everyday leadership), she created a movement that reached far beyond Kenya.

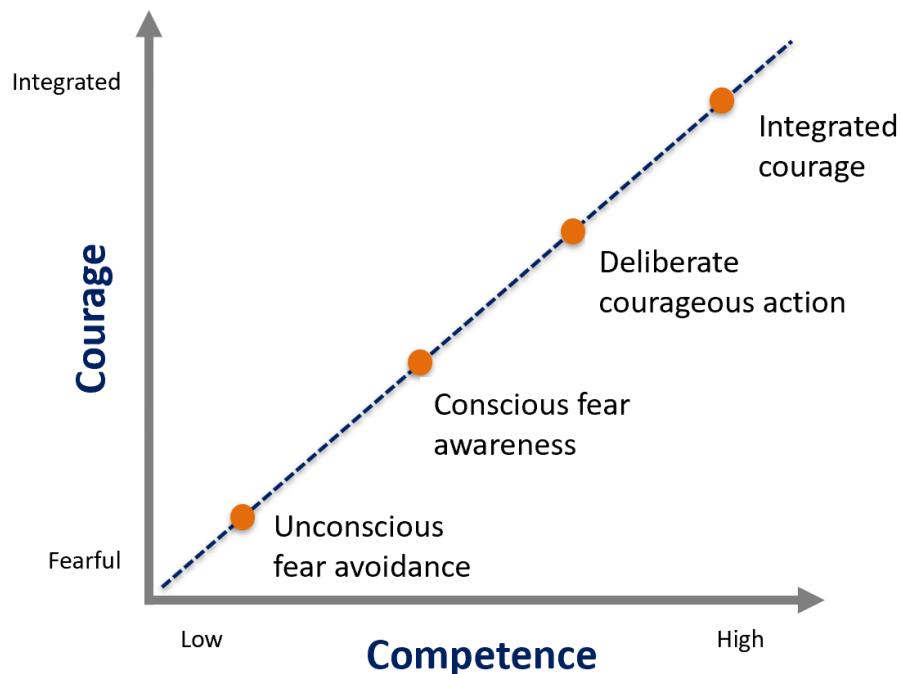
For leaders today, her example is both humbling and inspiring. It shows that leadership may begin with something as modest as planting a tree, but it can ripple outward to restore forests, reshape governance, and redefine hope for generations.

The lesson is clear: sometimes the most profound transformations start with small, tangible acts that embody a larger vision. For Maathai, each sapling was a protest, a promise, and a prophecy. Her life teaches us that leadership is not measured only by titles or positions, but by the courage to link seemingly ordinary actions to extraordinary change.

Model: The Courage Competence Curve

To better understand how courage grows in leadership, we can look at what I call the Courage Competence Curve. The framework illustrates the dynamic interplay between courage and competence, and the related concept of confidence in learning and growth:

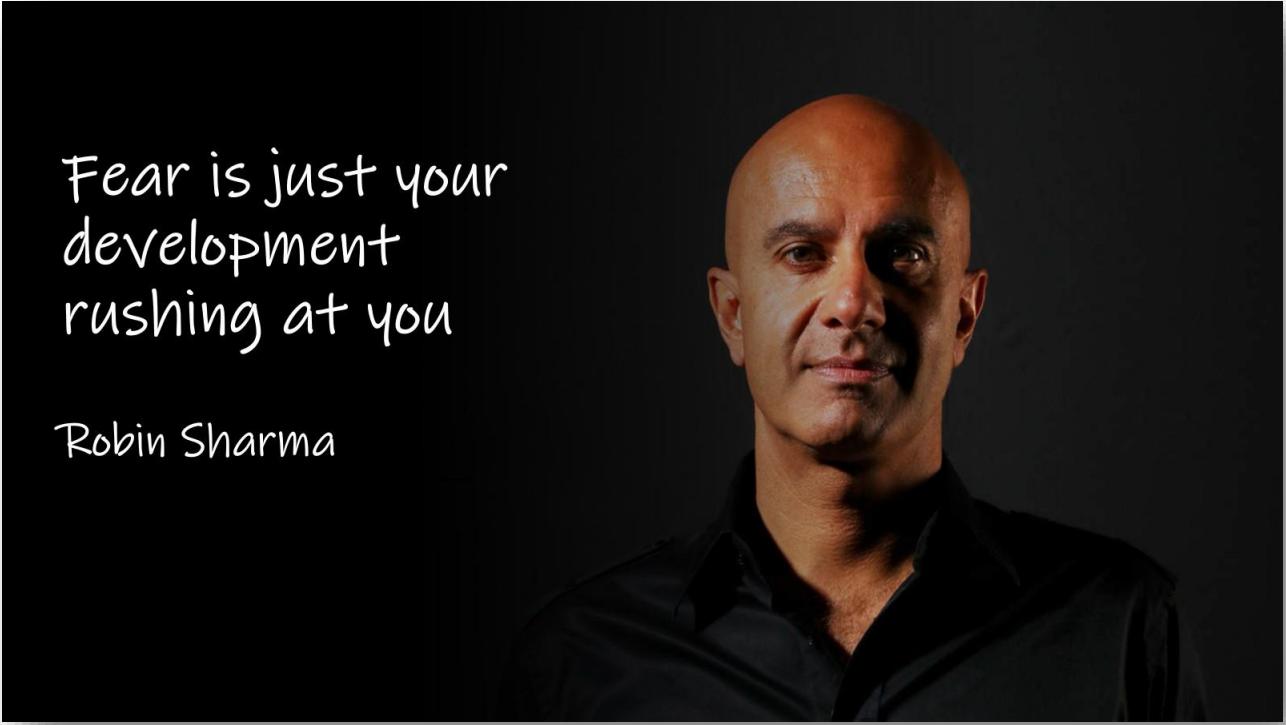
1. Unconscious Fear Avoidance – At this stage, leaders avoid difficult actions because fear runs the show. They may rationalise their avoidance with logic: “It’s not the right time”, or “We need more data”. In reality, fear is steering the decision.
2. Conscious Fear Awareness – Here, leaders begin to recognise fear as part of the leadership landscape. They notice its presence, name it, and start to separate themselves from it. The shift from *“I am afraid”* to *“I notice fear”* is critical – it creates space to choose a response rather than react automatically.
3. Deliberate Courageous Action – At this point, leaders intentionally choose to act in alignment with their values despite fear. This may feel clumsy or forced at first. The leader must almost “override” their instincts, reminding themselves that fear is not always a reliable guide.
4. Integrated Courage – Over time, through repeated practice, courageous behaviour becomes second nature. Leaders still experience fear, but it no longer derails them. Instead, fear becomes a signal to pay attention, not a command to stop.



The curve reminds us that courage is not binary – you don't "have it" or "lack it". Instead, courage is a developmental process. Leaders can train courage the way athletes train muscle: by practising in gradually more demanding contexts until it becomes an embodied capability.

A useful metaphor here is the gym. The first time you pick up a heavy weight, it feels impossible. But repetition builds strength. Courage works the same way: each act of stepping forward despite fear increases your capacity for the next one.

Where in your leadership are you hiding behind competence to avoid courage?



Fear is just your development rushing at you

Robin Sharma

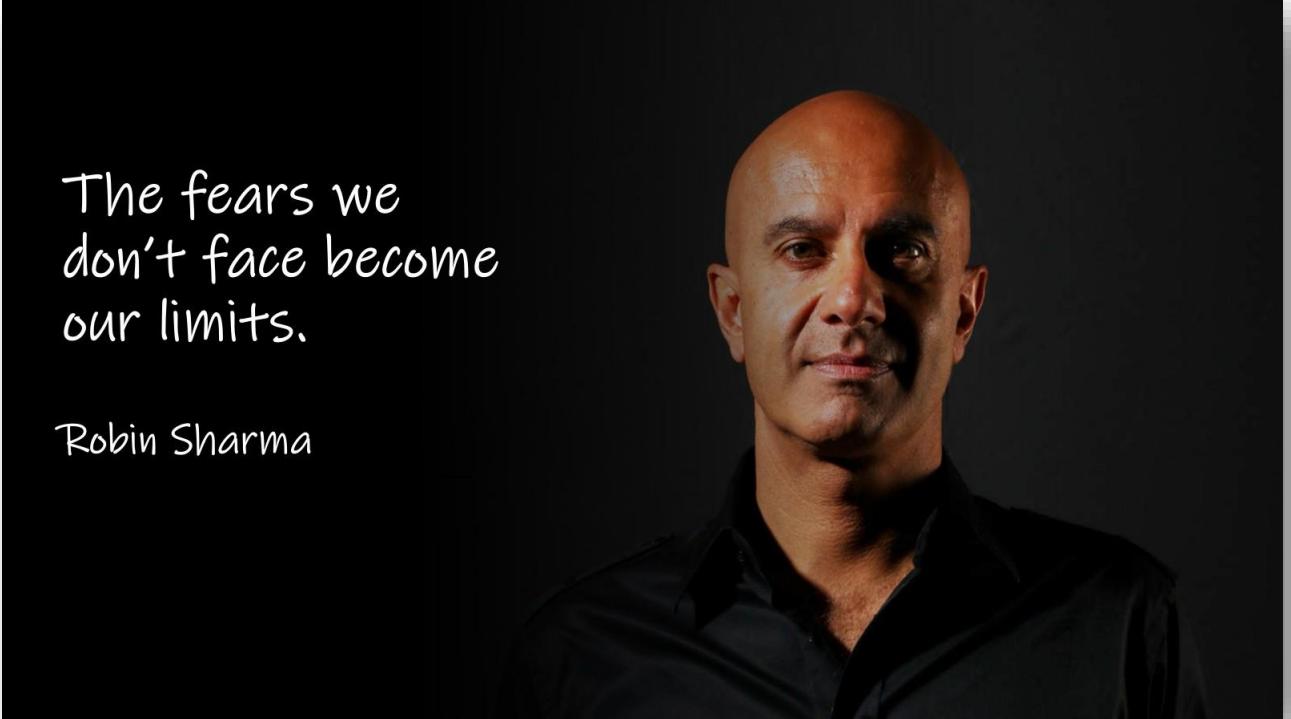
Practical Applications

1. Reframe fear as data – Fear is often a sign you are moving into new territory. Rather than asking, how do I get rid of this fear?, ask, what is this fear pointing to?
2. Start small, build capacity – Don't wait for a crisis to practise courage. Begin with smaller acts: saying what you really think in a meeting, asking a hard question, or admitting a mistake. These micro-acts build courage muscle.
3. Anchor in values – Fear can be overwhelming if you are not clear on why you are acting. When anchored in values – fairness, integrity, growth – you can withstand uncertainty because your actions are tethered to something deeper.
4. Model vulnerability – Courage is contagious. When leaders acknowledge their fears but act anyway, it gives permission for others to do the same. This builds cultures where people step up instead of shrinking back.

Write Your Own Chapter

- What would you do if fear were no longer the decision-maker – if you carried the torch and stepped forward anyway?
- Where are you waiting for competence when what's really required is courage?

- What's one bold action you could take now, even if your competence feels incomplete?
- Who could support you in growing competence after you've taken the courageous step?



The fears we
don't face become
our limits.

Robin Sharma

Chapter 8

Collective Identity – Leading Beyond the Self

Whose script are you performing – and when will you start writing your own?

Leadership is often told as the story of the individual: the lone CEO, the visionary founder, the charismatic change agent, or the heroic reformer. However, the deeper truth is that leadership is never solitary. It is always entangled in the collective – the shared identity of the team, organisation, or nation that leaders both shape and are shaped by.

Ontology and identity show us who we are. Courage shows us what we do. However, collective identity is the bridge: how individuals and groups align around a shared sense of meaning that allows them to act together in ways greater than any individual effort.

Metaphor: The Choir and the Song

A choir is made up of many voices, each with its own timbre and range. If every singer insisted on being heard as an individual, the result would be discord. However, when they tune into one another, they create harmony that transcends any single voice.

Collective identity works the same way. Leadership is not about silencing individuality; it is about orchestrating it into something larger. A choir without altos, tenors, or basses is incomplete. A team without diversity of perspective is weaker. The task of leadership is to ensure that the group has a song worth singing – and that everyone feels invited to raise their voice.

Case Study: Václav Havel (Czech Republic)

Václav Havel's journey from playwright to prisoner to president is one of the most striking illustrations of how narrative and integrity can reshape an entire nation. He did not set out to be a politician. He was an artist – a writer who understood that stories, symbols, and language carry the power to shape collective imagination. Yet when

history pressed him into leadership, he used these very tools to guide a country through one of the most profound transitions of the 20th century.

During the decades of communist rule in Czechoslovakia, Havel's plays were banned because they revealed uncomfortable truths about power, conformity, and the absurdities of authoritarian systems. He became a dissident voice, speaking truth in a society where truth was dangerous. His essays, particularly *The Power of the Powerless*, argued that even small acts of honesty and integrity – like refusing to live a lie – could destabilise oppressive regimes.

This commitment to “living in truth” landed him in prison multiple times. Yet imprisonment only amplified his moral authority. By the late 1980s, when communist regimes across Eastern Europe were faltering, Havel emerged as a central figure in the Velvet Revolution – a nonviolent movement that brought down decades of authoritarian rule in Czechoslovakia.

When he became president in 1989, Havel carried with him not only political legitimacy but also moral legitimacy. He led not through force or charisma but through authenticity, humility, and a profound respect for the role of story in shaping collective identity. He reminded his people that nations are not built solely on institutions or economies, but on the willingness of individuals to live by their deepest values.

For leaders today, Havel’s life is a reminder that the stories we tell – about who we are and what we stand for – can either reinforce systems of control or open up possibilities for renewal. His example shows that leadership is not always about seeking power but about standing so firmly in truth that, when history shifts, people recognise you as the voice they already trust.

Model: Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann)

Social constructionism argues that reality – including leadership, identity, and organisational culture – is not fixed, but co-created through shared language, rituals, and interactions. In other words: we build the world we live in together, and leadership identity emerges from those constructions.

Leadership is never a solo act. It is shaped by the collective stories, symbols, and agreements of the group. Teams and organisations construct their reality through meetings, narratives, and cultural practices. When leaders pay attention to these constructions, they can consciously reshape the group’s identity (e.g., moving from a culture of blame to one of learning).

The model suggests the following leadership applications:

- Language as a builder – Words like family, high performance, or innovators aren't just descriptions; they create identity. Leaders must choose language deliberately.
- Rituals and symbols – Regular rituals (e.g., weekly huddles, storytelling traditions, or company-wide celebrations) construct collective identity in lived practice.
- Challenging assumptions – By questioning entrenched narratives (we're too small to compete, this is just who we are), leaders open space for new possibilities.
- Co-creation – Leadership is less about imposition and more about participation – inviting people into authorship of the collective story.

The social constructionism also shows why toxic cultures are so hard to break: if the group's identity becomes centred on cynicism or fear, individuals conform even when it clashes with their values.

Leadership, then, is the work of reframing identity narratives: not just “what do we do”, but “who are we becoming?”.

Mandela exemplified this by moving South Africa's social construct from racial divides to shared citizenship, as the Rainbow Nation. In organisations, the best leaders do the same – they expand the boundaries of belonging.

Practical Applications

1. Craft a shared narrative – Regularly articulate not just *what* you are doing but *who you are as a team*. For example: “We are innovators who challenge norms”, or “We are a community that prioritises wellbeing”. This anchors behaviours in identity, not just in goals.
2. Use symbols and rituals – Identity is reinforced through small but powerful signals. A uniform, a slogan, or a weekly ritual can all say: *this is who we are*. Leaders who consciously design these touchpoints create stickiness in collective identity.
3. Expand the circle of belonging – Challenge exclusionary narratives. Ask: “Who is not yet included in our definition of *we*?”. Expanding belonging builds resilience and future-proofs the organisation.
4. Balance unity and diversity – Unity does not mean uniformity. Like the choir metaphor, the task is harmony, not sameness. Encourage distinct voices while keeping them aligned to the shared song.

Write Your Own Chapter

- What story of “who we are” are you telling – and who still feels outside of it?
- What script are you unconsciously acting out in your leadership?
- How is that script shaping the culture and results of your team?

- What new narrative could you begin writing today, and how would others know the story had changed?



Chapter 9

Re-Authoring Leadership – Writing the Next Chapter

What future becomes available the moment you choose differently?

Leadership is ultimately a narrative act. The stories we tell ourselves, our organisations, and our societies shape what we believe is possible. The danger is that we often unconsciously live within stories that were written for us – by history, culture, upbringing, or prior leaders. These stories create expectations and constraints, some of which serve us, but many of which hold us back.

To re-author leadership is to take the pen back into your hands. It is to recognise that while we cannot change the past, we can reinterpret it, and we can choose how it informs the future. Just as an author revises a manuscript, leaders revise their own identities, their organisations' narratives, and even the cultural myths in which they operate.

This is not an abstract idea. Think of leaders who transformed entire systems by rewriting the narrative. Václav Havel, the playwright turned Czech president, reframed politics as a moral project rather than a technical one. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf redefined what was possible for women in African politics by telling – and living – a new story of national renewal. Closer to home, Dame Whina Cooper's leadership journey was not defined by holding titles or formal authority, but by the way she embodied courage and responsibility throughout her long life.

These leaders did not simply react to circumstances; they *re-authored* the script. They invited their people to imagine themselves differently – not as victims of history but as authors of a new chapter.

Re-authoring leadership is therefore about three interwoven tasks:

1. Revisiting the past – understanding the story so far.
2. Reframing the present – choosing what parts of the narrative still serve and what must be shed.
3. Recasting the future – offering a compelling next chapter that people want to live into.

Metaphor: The Pen and the Map

Re-authoring leadership is like holding both a pen and a map. The map represents the terrain already travelled – the history, culture, and experiences that shape us. The pen represents our agency – the ability to decide how the next path will be drawn.

Too many leaders focus solely on the map, assuming the route is predetermined. Others clutch the pen but ignore the map, scribbling without respect for the terrain. True leadership requires both honouring where we have been while refusing to be confined by it and having the courage to draw a line toward a destination that does not yet exist.

Case Study: Sir Edmund Hillary (New Zealand)

Sir Edmund Hillary is best known as the first man, alongside Tenzing Norgay, to reach the summit of Mount Everest in 1953. But his enduring legacy lies not only in conquering the world's highest peak, but in what he did with the authority and recognition that followed. Hillary demonstrated a rare combination of humility, persistence, and commitment to service that made him a global model of leadership grounded in purpose rather than ego.

Hillary's climb to the summit was itself a story of perseverance. Facing extreme conditions and the possibility of failure at any step, he pressed forward with quiet determination. His understated words upon returning from the peak – "Well, we knocked the bastard off" – reflected his humility. He did not glorify the achievement as a personal triumph, but treated it almost as a matter-of-fact milestone in human exploration.

What makes Hillary particularly relevant as a leadership case study is what came after Everest. Rather than resting on fame, he devoted much of his life to the Sherpa people of Nepal, building schools, hospitals, bridges, and airstrips through the Himalayan Trust. He shifted from being a climber of mountains to a builder of communities, showing that true leadership is not about one defining act, but about sustained commitment to others.

Hillary's story offers a powerful metaphor: leadership is not just about reaching the summit. It is about who you become on the descent, and how you use your success to elevate others.

Model: Narrative Identity Theory

Narrative Identity Theory (Dan McAdams, Northwestern University) proposes that we understand ourselves by constructing life stories – internalised, evolving narratives that

integrate past, present, and anticipated future. These stories provide unity and purpose, shaping our actions in the world.

For leaders, this means identity is not fixed; it is authored and re-authored over time. A leader's ability to reinterpret their own story, failures included, determines whether they remain trapped by the past or become free to craft new possibilities.

Leaders carry both a personal narrative ("I am someone who...") and a collective narrative ("We are a team/organisation/nation that..."). Effective leadership requires integrating the two, so they are coherent and credible.

Re-authoring does not mean erasing; it means *selecting and reframing*. Mandela did not deny the suffering of apartheid but reframed it as the soil from which reconciliation could grow.

Neuroscience supports this: our brains are wired for narrative coherence. When a leader offers a new, believable story that connects past struggles with future hope, people's neural pathways literally reconfigure to see new possibilities.

The danger, of course, is false narratives. Populists can also re-author identity, but with exclusion or resentment at the centre. Authentic leadership requires constant discernment – am I telling a story that liberates, or one that confines?

Practical Applications

1. Audit your story – Write out the “official narrative” you live by as a leader. Ask: who wrote this? Which parts still serve me, and which parts keep me stuck?
2. Reframe organisational history – Every organisation has myths about its founding, its heroes, its failures. Instead of being captive to these, ask: how can we retell them, so they point forward rather than backward?
3. Invite collective authorship – Don’t just tell people the new story; invite them to co-author it. Workshops, strategy sessions, and even rituals can become spaces where the group defines “who we are becoming”.
4. Practice future-casting – Try narrative exercises where you and your team describe the organisation five or ten years from now – not just in terms of results, but as a story: what role will we have played, what obstacles did we overcome, what values guided us?
5. Beware false narratives – Be vigilant about stories that over-simplify, exclude, or demonise. The easiest story is not always the truest. Authentic leadership is not about easy mythmaking; it is about courageous truth-telling.

Re-authoring leadership is not about pretending we can control the script of life. We cannot erase history, nor can we guarantee how the future will unfold. But we *can* choose the story we tell about it – and that choice shapes how we act, how others follow, and what becomes possible.

When Václav Havel invited his people to “live in truth”, when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf spoke of national healing after years of conflict, they were not merely describing events. They were *rewriting the narrative*. They took broken plots and transformed them into stories of courage, resilience, and renewal.

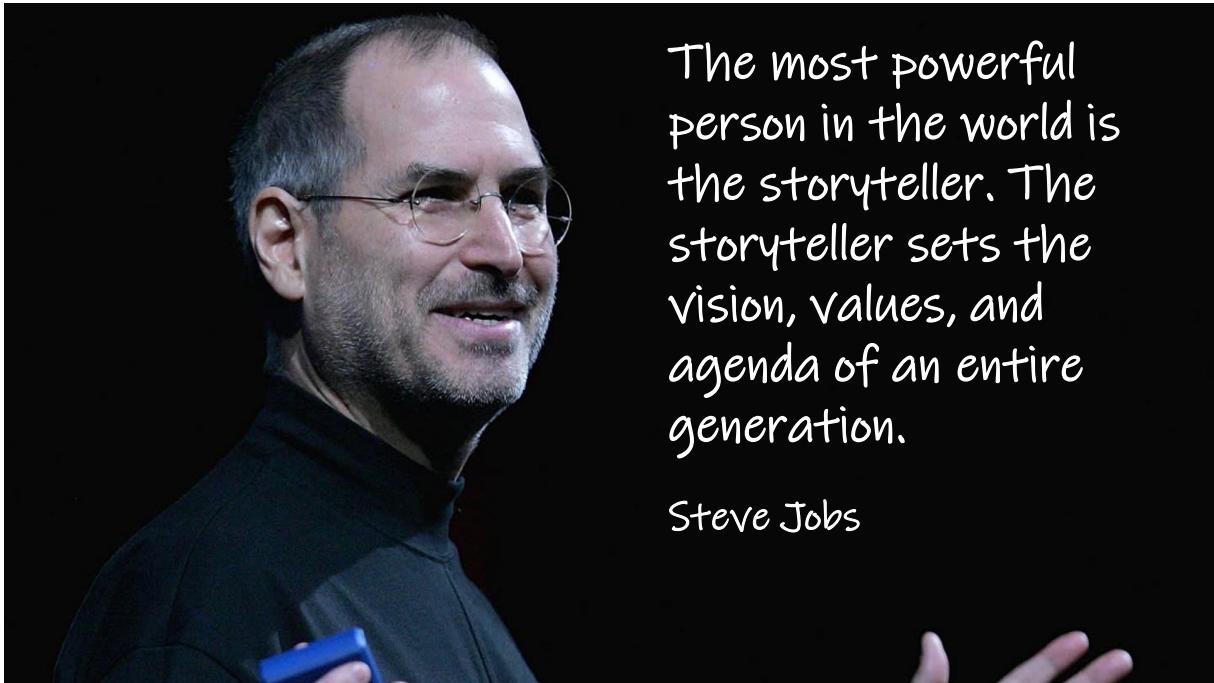
If leadership is a story you author, what story will die with you if you don't start rewriting it today?

Re-authoring leadership asks us to step into the dual role of reader and writer.

- As *readers*, we must pay attention to the stories already in circulation: the myths of our organisations, the assumptions of our cultures, the personal narratives we carry about our own worth.
- As *writers*, we must decide what parts to carry forward, what to discard, and what to create anew.
- This is deeply personal work. It requires looking at the stories we've told ourselves – perhaps that we're not ready, not worthy, or that leadership must always look a certain way – and asking whether those scripts still serve us. It requires courage to discard a narrative, discipline to live into a better one, and humility to let others shape the story with us.
- Re-authoring doesn't mean inventing a fairy tale. It means facing reality with honesty, and then choosing to tell it in a way that empowers rather than diminishes. It means writing from possibility instead of fear, from purpose instead of ego.
- Ultimately, leadership is the story we live. And the leaders who leave the deepest mark are those who write stories that outlive them – stories that inspire people to step into their own authorship.

Write Your Own Chapter

- What story are you telling with your leadership – and what story do you want the world to tell because of it?
- What leadership choices do you tend to avoid – and why?
- What possibilities could open if you made a different choice tomorrow?
- How would your future look if you acted as though possibility, not predictability, was your guide?



The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values, and agenda of an entire generation.

Steve Jobs

Epilogue

The Ongoing Story of Leadership

If leadership is a story, how will you keep re-authoring yours beyond this book?

Leadership is never finished. It is not a destination we arrive at, nor a final chapter we can close with satisfaction. It is an unfolding narrative – one that changes with every decision, every challenge, every relationship, and every season of life. If there is one truth this book has sought to illustrate, it is that leadership is as much about *how we experience and author our own being* as it is about the outcomes we deliver.

If anything, getting mastery at how we experience and author our own being will deliver bigger and better outcomes than you could ever imagine.

Throughout these chapters, we have travelled through four foundational lenses: phenomenology, ontology, identity, and behaviour. Each offered a way of seeing – a lens that helps us notice something often hidden in plain sight. We learned that:

- Phenomenology invites us to slow down and ask, *How am I experiencing this moment? What lens is shaping my perception?*
- Ontology pushes us to explore *who we are being* as leaders, not just what we are doing.
- Identity reminds us that the stories we tell about ourselves can both empower and constrain – and that growth often comes from loosening their grip and substituting past based stories for future based narratives and possibilities.
- Behaviour reveals the patterned habits we fall back on under pressure, and how often they limit our ability to lead with courage and creativity.

Together, these perspectives suggest that leadership is not merely a skillset or a toolkit. It is a lifelong act of authorship. To lead is to continually examine, reframe, and reimagine the story we live – and, by extension, the story we invite others into.

The Unfinished Script

The paradox of leadership is that just as we begin to feel confident in one chapter, the context shifts and a new one begins. The world changes. Markets disrupt. Teams evolve. The economy cycles. Our own inner lives demand attention. Just when we think we've mastered the story, the script changes.

That is not a failure of leadership – it is the very nature of it. Leadership is not a fixed state but an ongoing improvisation. Like a jazz musician, we are called to honour what

has gone before while also inventing in the moment, listening deeply to those around us, and shaping something new that did not exist before.

Passing the Pen

Great leaders are those who eventually hand the pen to others. They do not cling to authorship as a form of control, but instead invite others to contribute their voices, experiences, and imagination. In doing so, they build legacies not of dominance but of shared authorship. The organisations, communities, and families they leave behind continue to evolve because many hands hold the pen.

History shows us that the most enduring leaders are remembered not for perfection, but for the stories they helped others believe about themselves. Nelson Mandela is remembered for resilience and reconciliation, not for being without flaw. Sir Edmund Hillary is remembered for his humility and for serving others well beyond the recognition of his own unique achievement. These leaders rewrote the collective story, and in doing so gave their people the courage to imagine a different future.

Your Story, Still Being Written

This book is not meant to give you answers as much as lenses. It does not hand you a script, but a mirror and a pen. The mirror is there so you can see yourself more fully – the habits, the stories, the assumptions that shape your leadership. The pen is yours, so you can re-author what comes next.

You will never be finished. That may feel daunting, but it is also liberating. Because if the story is still unfolding, then you always have a chance to turn the page and write differently.

Get Ready To Draft Your Chapter

- What part of your leadership story is still unfinished?
- What stories are you willing to let go of to make room for a new story?
- What chapter will you commit to write in the next 90 days?
- Who do you need to invite into your story to make it extraordinary?

We are all stories
in the end. Just
make it a good
one.

Steven Moffat



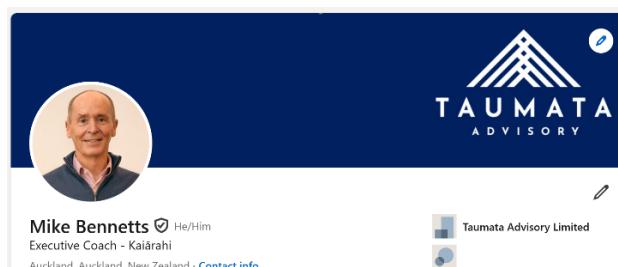
Realising Individual and Organisational Potential

Mike completed his global executive career in March 2023 and has since established his own coaching and consulting practice.

Visit Mike's website (www.taumataadvisory.com) and explore:

- Coaching – Mike can mentor or coach for any individual leadership circumstances and diverse business contexts. This mentoring or coaching can be delivered in a variety of formats: one-to-one, team meetings, development programs, workshops, etc.
- Consulting – Mike can enable and support transformational outcomes for projects, teams or the entire organisation. This is based on a proprietary and proven methodology underpinned by transferring mindsets and practices that grow a leader's capability for any future commitments to deliver extraordinary results.
- Speaking – Mike has a reputation for being an authentic and engaging storyteller and is available as a conference speaker or for presentations in smaller team settings.
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For more information, please get in touch with Mike at mike@taumataadvisory.com, including options for half day and full day workshops that enable you and your team to take practical steps to re-authoring your leadership and your organisation's stories.



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