

RE-AUTHORING LEADERSHIP

WHY WHO YOU ARE BEING
DETERMINES THE FUTURE
YOU CAN PRODUCE



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

You are not leading from who you are. You are leading from who you learned you had to be.

Somewhere early in your career, you figured it out. Not through formal instruction, but through experience. You learned what got rewarded and what got punished. You learned what kind of leader earned trust and what kind attracted suspicion. You learned how to read a room, how to manage upward, how to carry yourself when things went sideways. You built a repertoire. It worked, and you advanced.

That repertoire is not your leadership. It is a script you have been performing so fluently, for so long, that you have forgotten you are performing it at all.

The script was written by accumulated experience – by early wins and failures, by the bosses who shaped you, by the organisations that promoted you, by the moments that told you what you needed to be in order to succeed. It runs beneath your conscious decisions, faster than your reasoning, quieter than your intentions. It determines which situations feel threatening and which feel familiar. It decides which actions feel legitimate and which feel off-limits, before deliberate thought has any say in the matter.

The uncomfortable truth is this: most leaders plateau not because they lack capability, strategy, or will. They plateau because they are executing the same script with increasing sophistication – and calling it development.

This book is a challenge to that script. Not to discard it – much of what it contains earned its place – but to examine it. To hold it up and ask: does this still serve the leader I need to become? Or is it quietly conserving a version of me that the future no longer requires?

Where This Book Sits

This book is one of four that together explore a single question: why do capable, well-intentioned leaders produce results that are more predictable than they need to be – and what does it actually take to change that?

Underlying all four books is a structural model I call the Operating Primer. It describes the sequence of conditions through which leadership behaviour is produced:

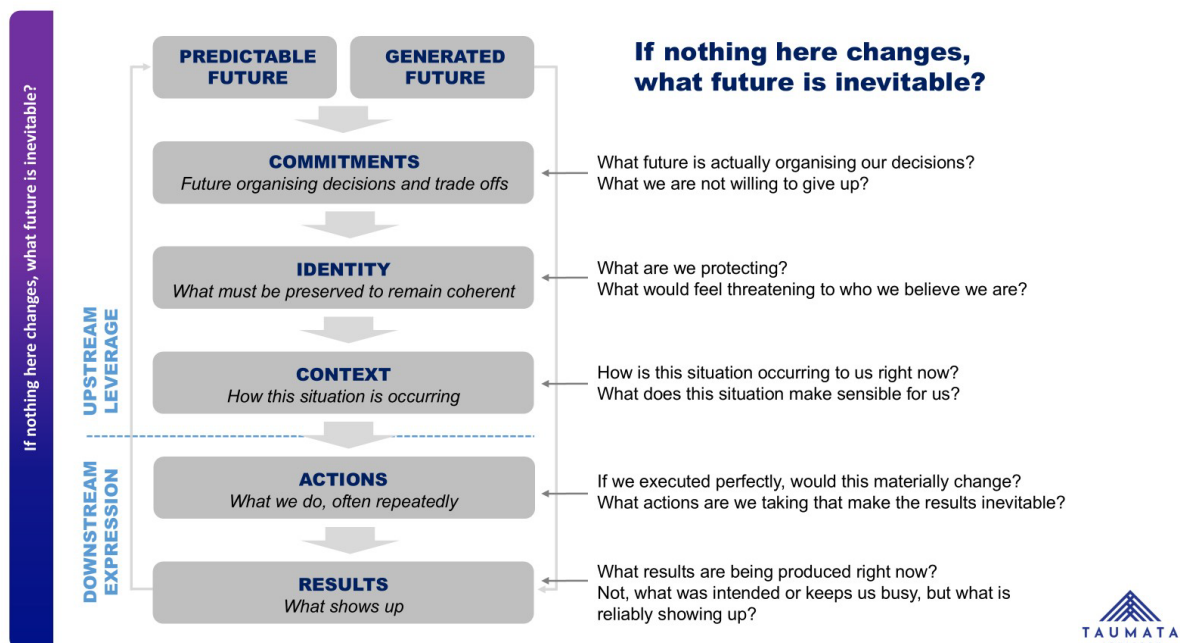
Commitment establishes the future leaders stand for, or the one they are unconsciously producing.

Identity shapes who leaders understand themselves to be in response to that future.

Context determines how situations occur and what actions seem reasonable.

Action follows from that interpretation.

Results are the observable, lagging outcome of everything upstream.



Most leaders intervene at the bottom of this sequence. They adjust Actions and expect Results to shift. They set clearer targets, tighten accountability, and escalate effort. When results remain stubbornly predictable despite sustained effort, the instinct is to do more of the same, with greater urgency.

The Operating Primer asks a different question. Not what should we do next, but what makes everything we are doing seem so reasonable, even as it limits what is possible? The answer lies upstream – in the three layers that sit above Action and Results: Commitment, Identity, and Context. These are where behaviour is organised. They are also where most leadership development never goes.

There is a critical distinction embedded in the Operating Primer. A Predictable Future is inherited – it is inferred from the past and produced by the current configuration of Identity, Context, and Commitment. A Generated Future is declared – it is brought into existence by shifting those upstream conditions. Most organisations are attempting to produce a future their current operating system is structurally designed to prevent.

The distinction between a Predictable Future and a Generated Future is the most consequential distinction in this book. Chapter 1 defines both precisely.

The Four Books and What Each Addresses

Each book in this series addresses one primary layer of the Operating Primer. They can be read independently as each is designed as a complete entry point. Readers familiar with the series will recognise how each book extends and deepens the architecture the others establish.

Re-Authoring Leadership (this book) works at the level of Identity. It asks who you are being while you lead – not what you are doing. Its argument is that extraordinary performance does not arise from superior strategy or sharper execution alone. It arises from an examined, expanded sense of who you are as a leader. The script you are carrying was written by your past. This book gives you the tools to rewrite it.

The Commitment Advantage works at the level of Commitment. Most leaders operate from compliance – doing what is expected or required. Commitment, by contrast, is a declared future that organises behaviour independent of circumstance. That book examines why so many organisations are living into a future they would not have consciously chosen, and what it takes to generate a different one.

Above the Ceiling examines what happens when Identity and Commitment misalign, which is most of the time, for most leaders. It addresses the structural ceiling that forms when Identity remains organised around past success while Commitment declares a different future. The gap between them is not a motivation problem. It is a structural one, and that book shows how to close it.

What Water? works at the level of Context –the invisible environment of interpretation within which Identity stabilises, Commitment strengthens or erodes, and Action becomes obvious or impossible. Context is the water organisations swim in. Most leaders cannot see it, which is precisely why it governs them. That book makes Context visible, and shows how to design it deliberately rather than inherit it unconsciously.

What This Book Does

This book explores Identity through four interwoven lenses. Two that explain how Identity forms and operates, and two that explain how it constrains and can be shifted.

Phenomenology – how you experience the world in the present moment. People do not respond to reality itself. They respond to how reality occurs to them. This distinction is not philosophical. It is causal.

Ontology – the nature of being. Who you are as a leader, not only what you do. The way you are being in any given moment shapes every action you take and every result you produce, more reliably than your skills, your strategy, or your intentions.

Identity – the accumulated interpretation of past experience that determines what feels possible, permissible, and necessary. Not a fixed core, but a story that has been told so many times it now feels indistinguishable from fact.

Behavioural Patterns – the preconditioned responses that reproduce Identity under pressure. These are not character flaws. They are the grooves worn by repetition, becoming efficient, automatic, and often invisible until the results they produce are examined.

Each chapter is designed not to inform but to interrupt – to make the familiar script harder to keep running unconsciously.

What This Book Asks of You

This is not a book you apply. It is a book you inhabit. The concepts here do not produce results by being understood. They produce results when they are used as lenses – worn into the leadership moments that matter, brought to bear on the situations where the script runs loudest.

You are reading this as someone who leads – a CEO, a board director, a senior executive, a founder, or someone moving into a larger version of those roles. At your level, the questions are rarely about capability. They are about range. The leader who plateaus is almost never the least capable person

in the room. They are the one whose Identity has narrowed around a particular way of operating, and who has mistaken that narrowing for character.

Re-authoring leadership is not a transformation programme. It is a practice, the ongoing discipline of examining the script, questioning what is inherited, and choosing deliberately what to carry forward. It does not produce a new version of you. It produces a version of you that is no longer unconsciously limited by the version that came before.

A Note on Language

Throughout this book, certain words are capitalised: Commitment, Identity, Context, Action, and Results.

This is deliberate. When written in lower case, these words carry their everyday meaning. When capitalised, they refer to specific structural components within the Operating Primer.

Commitment is not preference or intention. It is a declared future that organises behaviour independent of circumstance. Identity is not personality or branding. It is the stabilised interpretation of self that determines what feels legitimate, possible, and necessary. Action is not activity. It is behaviour aligned with Identity and Commitment. Results are not random outcomes. They are the predictable consequence of aligned – or misaligned – layers above them.

Capitalisation signals that we are working inside a model. Precision matters because causality matters. Without that distinction, the argument collapses into abstraction. With it, the mechanism becomes visible.

The script is already running. Re-authoring it does not begin with examining the past. It begins with declaring a future the past can no longer justify – and committing to it before you are ready.

Chapter 1

Phenomenology – How Leadership Actually Works

You are not responding to what is happening. You are responding to how it is occurring to you. So is everyone you lead.

Most leadership theory begins with a silent assumption: that there is a shared reality, and that the leader's job is to respond to it wisely. Better analysis, clearer strategy, sharper execution. The assumption is so embedded in how organisations talk about performance that it rarely gets examined.

It is also wrong – or at least radically incomplete.

Leaders do not respond to reality. They respond to how reality is occurring to them. And the people they lead do not respond to the leader's intentions, their strategy documents, or the logic of their decisions. They respond to how those things are occurring – in this meeting, at this moment, given everything that has happened before.

This is phenomenology: the study of lived experience. Not what happened, but how it happened for someone. Not what was said, but what landed. Not what was decided, but what it meant to the people who now have to act on it.

This distinction is not philosophical. It is one of the most causally significant facts about leadership, and one of the least examined.

The Gap That Governs Performance

Consider what happens in most organisations when a significant change is announced. The logic is sound. The case has been made. The leadership team is aligned. And then, almost immediately, the

gap opens. Between what was communicated and what was heard. Between the intention and the occurring. Between the leader's reality and everyone else's.

A strategy that is occurring as a threat will be resisted, regardless of its merit. A restructure that is occurring as betrayal will produce disengagement, regardless of the severance terms. A challenge that is occurring as an attack will produce defensiveness, regardless of how carefully it was worded.

None of this is irrational. It is entirely coherent, from inside the occurring. People act on how situations present themselves to them, emotionally, relationally, historically. They are not ignoring the facts. They are living inside a different set of them.

This is the gap where most organisational energy is lost. Not in strategy. Not in execution. In the space between what leaders intend and how those intentions land.

Here is what makes that gap important beyond communication: it is also where Drift originates. When the future is occurring as inevitable – as simply the way things are heading – no one intervenes. The organisation does not resist the Predictable Future. It does not even see it as a choice. It simply continues, coherently, in the direction the current occurring makes obvious. Closing the gap does not begin with better communication. It begins with leaders who genuinely understand that their reality is one occurring among many, and that the occurring of others is not a distortion of the truth. It is the operational truth.

Before going further, two terms need to be defined precisely, because they will carry significant weight throughout this book and the series.

A Predictable Future is the future the system is already designed to produce. It is inferred from the past – from the current configuration of Identity, Context, and Commitment – and it will arrive without requiring any deliberate act. Most organisations are living inside a Predictable Future right now. Not because they lack ambition, but because the upstream conditions generating their Results have not been interrupted. The Predictable Future is not always unwelcome. Sometimes it is acceptable, even good. The problem arises when leaders declare a different future while leaving the conditions producing the Predictable Future entirely intact.

A Generated Future is different. It is not extrapolated from current conditions. It is declared – brought into existence by a Commitment that reorganises Identity, Context, and Action around what has been stood for. Generated Futures cannot be reasoned into existence. They cannot be planned into existence. They are the consequence of a Commitment strong enough to make the existing system untenable.

Most of what gets called transformation is the management of a Predictable Future.

Most strategic plans are not Generated Futures. They are better-managed versions of what already exists.

The distinction between the two is one of the most consequential in leadership, and one of the least examined. It will return throughout this book.

What Neuroscience Confirms

The philosophical tradition of phenomenology – developed through Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer – has always made this claim. What is relatively recent is the neuroscientific evidence that confirms and extends it.

Lisa Feldman Barrett's research on predictive processing establishes something significant: the brain does not register reality passively and then form a response. It does something more active and more consequential. It continuously generates predictions about what is happening, based on accumulated prior experience, and then matches incoming information against those predictions. Perception is not observation. It is an inference.

What this means in practice is that two leaders can sit in the same Board meeting, hear the same presentation, and genuinely experience different situations – because their predictive models, built from different histories, are generating different occurrences. Neither is misreading the room. Each is reading it accurately through the model their experience has constructed.

For leaders, this has a direct implication. When a team member reacts differently from how you expect – when your message lands differently from how you intended, when your decision creates resistance you did not anticipate – the gap is almost never about the facts. It is about the occurring. And the occurring is being generated by a predictive model built from that person's history, not yours.

This is why phenomenological awareness is not a soft skill. It is a precision tool. Leaders who develop it are not more empathetic in a general sense. They are more accurate. They are reading the room more completely, including the parts of the room that do not appear in the data.

Case Study: Nelson Mandela (South Africa)

Mandela's leadership after 27 years of imprisonment is the most instructive example in the modern record of a leader who understood, at depth, that what mattered was not the facts of a situation but how those facts would be occurring to his people.

When he walked free in 1990, the factual situation was this: South Africa faced potential civil war, a deeply traumatised Black majority, a fearful white minority, and an international community watching closely. Those were the facts. But the leadership question was not what to do with those facts. It was how to shape how this moment would be occurring – for every constituency, simultaneously, across a fractured nation.

Mandela's every gesture was phenomenologically precise. He did not simply preach reconciliation. He made reconciliation occur. The Springbok jersey at the 1995 Rugby World Cup was not a symbolic gesture in the decorative sense. It was a deliberate act of occurring-design: taking something that had been occurring as the property of white South Africa and making it occur, in that moment, as shared national possibility. The jersey did not change any facts. It changed everything that mattered.

He understood something that many leaders spend entire careers missing: the leader's job is not to be understood. It is to shape how situations are occurring for others – including the ones who are most afraid, most angry, and most convinced that the past is the only reliable guide to the future.

This is not charisma. It is not natural talent. It is the disciplined practice of attending to occurring rather than assuming that clear communication of the facts will do the work.

What is also worth noting in Mandela's case: his ability to shape occurring was inseparable from his Commitment. The declared future – reconciliation and shared citizenship – was not a communication strategy. It was a stand that reorganised what he was willing to do, what he was willing to risk, and therefore what became occurring as possible for those around him. Occurring follows Commitment. The chapter on Commitment will return to this directly.

The Hermeneutic Dimension

Heidegger's contribution to phenomenology is particularly relevant to leadership: we are always being-in-the-world. We never encounter a situation neutrally, as if arriving without history. We arrive carrying accumulated interpretations – of organisations, of authority, of what this kind of

moment has meant before. Those interpretations shape the occurring before a word has been spoken.

Gadamer extended this into what he called the fusion of horizons: genuine understanding requires not just hearing another person's perspective, but allowing it to reshape your own. This is not consensus-building in the managerial sense. It is something harder, being genuinely open to having your interpretation changed by what you encounter. Most leaders are not. They are listening for confirmation, not revision.

The practical consequence is significant. If occurrences are generated by prior interpretations, then the leader who wants to shift what is occurring must first understand what interpretive history is generating the current occurring. That requires a quality of curiosity that goes beyond asking for feedback. It requires genuinely not knowing – holding your own interpretation as provisional, and treating others' occurrences as information rather than error.

Organisations Execute from Occurring, Not from Reality

This is the load-bearing claim of this chapter, and it deserves to be stated directly.

Most execution failure is not capability failure. It is interpretive failure.

The plan was sound. The people were capable. The resources were adequate. But the future was occurring as threatening, or as not quite real, or as someone else's problem, or as probably going to be revised anyway. And so the Actions that followed were coherent – with the occurring, not with the declared direction.

This is why execution cannot be fixed by tightening accountability without first attending to what the situation is occurring as. Tighter accountability inside a threatening occurring produces compliance and concealment, not movement. Clearer targets inside an occurring of futility produce activity, not Results.

The leader who understands this has access to the upstream lever. They are not trying to change behaviour by adjusting incentives. They are asking the prior question: what is this situation

occurring as for the people whose behaviour needs to shift? And what would need to change – in what is communicated, how it is held, what comes before and after – for a different occurring to be available?

That is phenomenology applied. Not as philosophy but as precision leadership.

The Operating Primer Connection

In the Operating Primer, Context sits above Action and Results. Context is the field of interpretation – how situations are occurring across the system – that makes certain Actions seem reasonable and others unthinkable.

Phenomenology is the explanation of how Context operates at the individual level. When a situation is occurring as threatening, Actions that protect become reasonable. When it is occurring as urgent, Actions that compress and accept risk become reasonable. When it is occurring as politically complex, Actions that manage perception rather than outcomes become reasonable.

The leader who understands phenomenology has access to the upstream lever. But phenomenology alone does not interrupt Drift. Understanding that the occurring is generating the behaviour is necessary. It is not sufficient. What reorganises the occurring – at a structural level rather than a momentary one – is Identity, and above that, Commitment. Those are the subjects of the chapters that follow. This chapter establishes the foundation: occurring governs Action. Until leaders can see that clearly, everything else is downstream problem-solving.

What This Requires in Practice

Developing phenomenological awareness is not a checklist. It is a practice – developed through repetition in real conditions, not through understanding the concept.

The discipline has three movements.

The first is noticing your own occurring. Before attempting to understand how a situation is occurring for others, leaders need to develop the capacity to catch their own interpretation in the act. Not what is happening, but how is this occurring to me, right now? Is this occurring as a threat or a challenge? As familiar or disorienting? As a problem to solve or a signal to read? The occurring often presents as fact. The discipline is to treat it as interpretation.

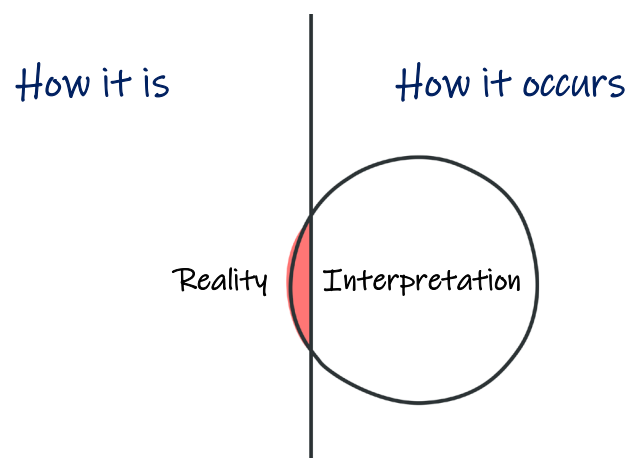
The second is genuine curiosity about others' occurings. Not asking how someone feels as a courtesy but treating their experience of the situation as operationally significant data. The team

member who is resistant is not being difficult. They are responding coherently to how the situation is occurring for them. Understanding that occurring is not a therapy exercise. It is the starting point for effective influence.

The third is occurring-design: deliberately shaping how situations present themselves – through language, timing, framing, sequencing, and presence – to make different Actions available. This is not manipulation. It is the exercise of leadership responsibility at the level where it actually operates.

Write Your Own Chapter

- Think of a situation in your organisation where effort and logic have not produced the result you expected. How is that situation occurring for the people whose behaviour needs to shift – and how do you know?
- When did you last allow someone else's occurring of a situation to genuinely revise your own interpretation? What made that possible?
- What is one situation you are currently experiencing as a problem? How might it occur differently – and what would become available if it did?
- Where is Drift present in your organisation because the future is occurring as inevitable rather than as a choice?



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.

Chapter 2

Ontology – Who You Are Being While You Lead

*Two leaders say the same thing. One moves people. The other does not.
The difference is not the words.*

There is a layer of leadership that most development programmes never reach. It sits beneath strategy, beneath communication skills, beneath the careful management of stakeholder relationships. It is the layer from which everything else actually originates.

Not what you do. Who you are Being while you do it.

This is ontology – the study of Being. Not Being in the abstract philosophical sense, but Being in the most immediate and practical sense: the particular way you are present in a room, in a decision, in a conversation that is going sideways. The way you are Being in any given moment shapes what is possible in that moment – for you, and for everyone around you – more reliably than your intentions, your skills, or your plan.

Most leaders have a to-do list. Almost none have a to-be list. That gap is where most leadership ceilings form.

The Distinction That Changes Everything

Think of the last time you watched a leader handle a difficult situation badly. Not dramatically, just ineffectively. Chances are the problem was not what they said. The logic was probably sound, the

information accurate, the intention reasonable. What was wrong was the Being underneath the words.

A leader who is Being defensive will produce defensiveness in others, regardless of how carefully the message is worded. A leader who is Being controlling will produce dependency, regardless of how often they say they want their team to take initiative. A leader who is Being resigned will produce resignation in the organisation, whether or not they are saying the right things about possibility and ambition.

This is not about authenticity in the popular sense – being your genuine self, expressing your true feelings. It is more structural than that. Being is the ground from which Action emerges. Change the ground, and the Action changes. Leave the ground unchanged, and no amount of adjustment at the level of behaviour will produce a lasting shift.

The conventional leadership development assumption is that if you give people the right skills, behaviours, and tools, performance will follow. Ontology reverses that logic. Who must I be, such that the right Actions become natural? Not: what do I need to do? But: who do I need to be, such that what needs doing becomes inevitable?

There is a further implication that connects directly to the book's central argument. Being is shaped by Identity – the accumulated story of who a leader has learned they must be. And Identity is organised by Commitment. Which means that who a leader is Being in any given moment is not simply a matter of personal choice. It is the downstream expression of what they are committed to, consciously or not. A leader who is Being cautious when courage is required is not choosing caution in that moment. They are expressing a Commitment – to competence protection, to reputation preservation, to being seen in a particular way – that was never made explicit and has never been examined. Ontology makes that visible. Commitment changes it.

Metaphor: The Container and the Water

Imagine yourself as a container, and your Actions as the water within it. You can add colour to the water, heat it, stir it differently. However, it will always take the shape of the container. The container determines what is possible for the water – not the other way around.

Your Being is that container. It shapes how your Actions land, how others experience your presence, and ultimately, the range of Results you can produce. Leaders who work only on their behaviour are working on the water. The container – the way of Being from which all Action flows – remains unchanged.

To lead at a genuinely different level, the container must be reshaped.

Case Study: Dame Whina Cooper (Aotearoa New Zealand)

Dame Whina Cooper is one of the most instructive examples of ontological leadership in the modern record – and one that matters particularly in the context of this book, which is concerned not just with individual performance but with the Being that makes transformation possible.

Born in 1895 in Northland, she was raised within Te Ao Māori, where leadership was never separable from whakapapa, whenua, and whānau. Identity, land, and people were not three separate concerns. They were one. That integration gave her a way of Being in which leadership was not a role she performed but an expression of who she was – her presence, her voice, her willingness to occupy the front of a march at the age of 79 with no formal power, no institutional backing, and no guarantee of outcome.

The 1975 Māori Land March was not an event Dame Whina Cooper organised in the conventional sense. It was an event she embodied. The march happened because of what she was Being – an unshakable presence of dignity, ancestral authority, and fierce love for her people – not because of what she did in any tactical or managerial sense. She did not lead the march. She was the march's reason for existing.

What is important here is the relationship between her Being and her Commitment. Dame Whina Cooper was not Being courageous as a style or a technique. She was organised around a Commitment – to the land, to her people, to a future that had not yet been secured – that made a different way of Being not just available but structurally necessary. Her Being was the expression of her Commitment made visible in a room, in a body, in a walk down a road. That is the direction of causality this book is tracing: Commitment organises Identity, Identity shapes Being, Being changes what occurs as possible.

The question she implicitly poses, and explicitly lived, is not what should I do? It is who must I be, for something better to become possible?

The Three Domains of Being

The practical framework for working with Being comes from the tradition of ontological coaching, developed primarily through the work of Fernando Flores and Julio Olalla, drawing on the philosophical lineage of Heidegger and – in the organisational context – Werner Erhard's foundational work on Being and performance.

The framework identifies three domains through which Being operates and can be shifted.

Language is the first. Not language as communication technique, but language as the medium in which leaders live and through which they generate reality for others. The words a leader uses consistently do not just describe situations, they create them. A leader whose language is consistently oriented toward threat and scarcity generates a different organisational reality from one whose language opens possibility. This is not positive thinking. It is the recognition that language is constitutive, it shapes what exists in the space between people. When a leader says we cannot afford to fail here, something is created in the room. When they say this is where we find out what we are capable of, something different is created. The facts may be identical. The Being, and the organisational reality it generates, are not.

Emotions are the second domain. Not emotions as private psychological states to be managed, but emotions as collective climates that a leader's Being produces and sustains in a room, a team, an organisation. A leader who is Being resigned does not keep their resignation private. It becomes the emotional weather of their team – the background mood against which every decision, every initiative, every aspiration is experienced. Conversely, a leader who is genuinely Being committed – not performing Commitment, but inhabiting it – creates a different climate. People behave differently inside different emotional climates, not because they are being managed but because the ground of their experience has shifted.

Body is the third domain. This is perhaps the least discussed at the executive level, where leadership is still largely conceived as an intellectual and verbal activity. But the research is unambiguous: posture, pace, physical presence, and the way a leader occupies space communicate Being before a word is spoken, and often more accurately than anything said. A leader whose body is contracted and guarded communicates that contraction regardless of the words used. A leader who is physically present – grounded, open, genuinely settled in the room – communicates that settledness in a way no verbal statement can replicate.

The critical insight from Flores and Olalla is that these three domains are not independent. Shifting one while leaving the others unchanged produces inauthenticity – the gap others experience when a leader's words say one thing and their presence says another. Genuine transformation requires coherence across all three: the language, the emotional ground, and the physical presence all pointing in the same direction. When they align, the shift in Being is felt immediately. It does not require announcement.

Pressure Reveals Being

There is a diagnostic principle that runs throughout this book and deserves its first explicit statement here.

Pressure does not create who a leader is.

Pressure reveals who a leader is.

In reflective moments, in coaching conversations, in carefully designed offsites, leaders can access ways of Being that feel genuine and available. Under pressure – in the Board meeting that is going sideways, in the performance conversation that has become defensive, in the crisis that has no clear answer – the Being that has been most deeply practised and most structurally reinforced will surface. Not the Being that was intended. The Being that the Identity underneath has been organising for years.

This is not a failure of character. It is a structural consequence of Identity operating without examination. And it is why the chapters that follow – on Identity, on preconditioned behaviours, and on Commitment – are not separate topics. They are the successive layers of what is actually generating the Being that appears under pressure.

The to-be list matters not because it is aspirational. It matters because it makes explicit the Being that Commitment requires, and creates the structural reference point against which pressure can be measured.

The Operating Primer Connection

In the Operating Primer's sequence, Identity sits above Context, which sits above Action and Results. Ontology is the discipline through which Identity is accessed, examined, and shifted.

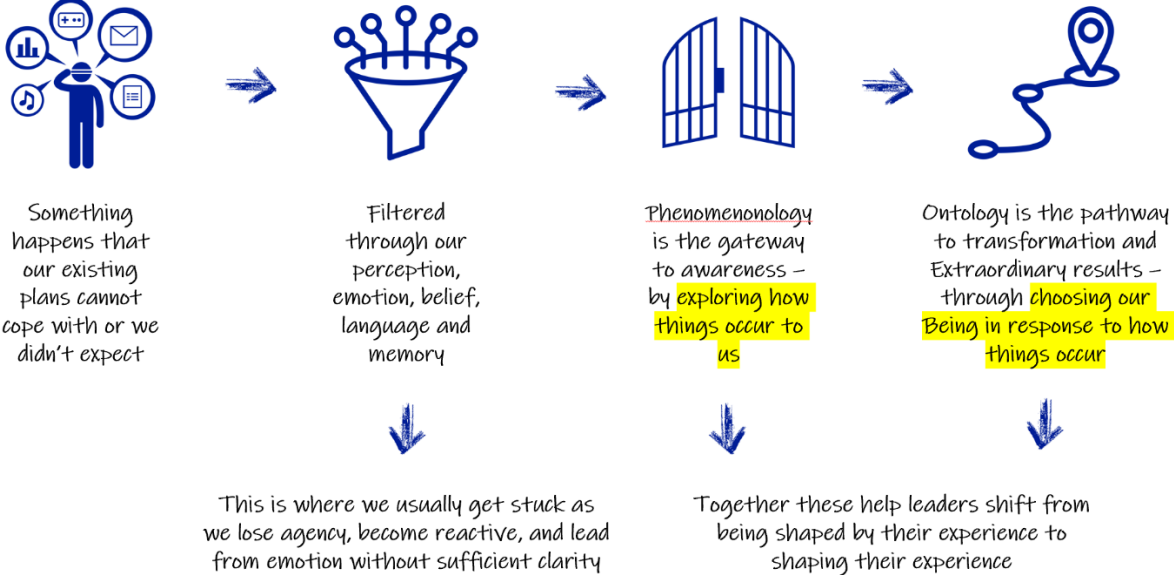
Identity, in the Operating Primer sense, is the accumulated story of who a leader has learned they must be. That story operates primarily through Being: through the language that feels natural, the emotional ground that feels normal, the physical presence that becomes habitual. Identity is not

held in a leader's head as a belief system. It is held in their body, their language, and their emotional defaults. It is expressed, moment to moment, as Being.

Phenomenology, which Chapter 1 established, explains how situations are occurring to a leader. Ontology explains who they are Being in response. Together they describe the two most immediate upstream conditions from which every Action, and ultimately every Result, flows. The leader who can see both – how things are occurring for them, and who they are Being in response – has genuine leverage on their performance.

However, awareness of Being does not change it. That is the limit this chapter arrives at, and the limit the next chapter begins from. Identity is what is organising the Being. And Identity does not change through insight or intention alone. It changes when a Commitment is made that is strong enough to require a different Being – not as a goal to aspire toward, but as a structural necessity of what has been declared.

The sequence below captures how phenomenology and ontology work together, and why both are necessary for the shift from being shaped by experience to shaping it.



What Identity are you so committed to protecting that it is limiting your leadership?

Write Your Own Chapter

- Think of a leader whose presence changed what was possible in a room. What were they Being, not doing, that produced that effect?
- In your most challenging leadership context right now, who are you Being? Map it across the three domains: what is your language generating, what emotional climate are you producing, what is your physical presence communicating?
- Where is there a gap between your stated way of Being and what others actually experience? How do you know?
- What does your Being under pressure reveal about what you are actually committed to, as distinct from what you say you are committed to?

Chapter 3

Identity – The Story You Mistake For Yourself

The script was not handed to you. It accumulated. And it has been running ever since.

Chapters 1 and 2 established two things. How situations are occurring to you shapes every Action you take. Who you are Being in response shapes what Results you can produce. Both are true. Both matter. But neither fully explains why the patterns persist.

A leader can recognise that a situation is occurring as threatening and still react as if it is. They can know, intellectually, that a different way of Being is available, and still default to the familiar one under pressure. Awareness, by itself, does not produce change. Something more stable is doing the organising.

That something is Identity.

Identity, in the sense used throughout this book and the Operating Primer, is not personality. It is not the values on your organisation's wall, or the strengths profile from your last assessment, or the way you would describe yourself in a job interview. Identity is the accumulated story of who you have learned you must be – in order to succeed, to stay safe, and to remain coherent.

More precisely:

Identity is a warehouse of unexamined Commitments.

Not declared Commitments, the ones this book will return to as the upstream force that reorganises everything. Undeclared Commitments. The ones that formed through repetition and reinforcement, that have never been named, and that are nonetheless operative in every consequential moment.

I must be seen as competent. I must not lose credibility. I must stay in control. I must protect what I have built. I must not be exposed as uncertain.

These are not character flaws. They are the accumulated evidence of what worked. And they are running the leader – quietly, efficiently, and almost entirely without examination.

How Identity Forms

Identity does not arrive fully formed. It accumulates through repetition, reinforcement, and the conclusions drawn from formative experience.

Early in a career, certain behaviours are rewarded. Others are penalised. A leader learns – not through formal instruction but through the accumulating evidence of what works – what kind of person succeeds in this environment. They become that person. The becoming feels like growth, because it is. They are developing genuine capability and genuine character.

What they are also developing, invisibly, is a set of Commitments about who they need to be. Those Commitments harden over time. Promotions reinforce them. Each success deposits another layer. The behaviour that differentiated them early becomes, gradually, the behaviour they are known for, relied upon for, and eventually confined by.

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey's research on adult development names the mechanism precisely. People do not resist change because of weakness or lack of will. They resist it because their current Identity is actively, and invisibly, organised to prevent it. The accumulated story is not inert. It is load-bearing and it is holding something in place. What it is holding in place, most often, is safety. The Identity that formed was the one that worked. Departing from it feels, at a very immediate level, like risk – even when the situation has changed entirely and the old Identity is now the constraint rather than the asset.

This is not a personal failure. It is a structural consequence. And it is the reason why re-authoring leadership does not begin with examining the past. It begins with authoring a Commitment strong enough that the existing Identity has to reorganise around it. That is the mechanism. The chapters that follow will trace how it operates.

Metaphor: The River and Its Banks

Imagine Identity as the banks of a river. The banks give the river shape, direction, and momentum. Without them, the water spreads aimlessly, losing both force and direction. However, when the banks are too rigid or too narrow, the river cannot respond to the landscape. It floods where it should flow, and stagnates where it should move.

Leadership Identity works the same way. It channels energy, provides direction, and makes sustained effort possible. A leader without any stable sense of Identity is not liberated – they are rudderless. However, a leader who clings to Identity as if it were fixed – this is just who I am – is a river that cannot navigate its own terrain, especially a changing terrain.

The question is not whether to have banks. It is whether the banks still serve the river's destination. And whether a Commitment to a new destination is sufficient to reshape them.

Case Study: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia)

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's path to becoming Africa's first elected female head of state is one of the clearest examples in the modern leadership record of Identity examined, fractured, and reorganised – not by an act of will on the Identity itself, but by the force of a Commitment that the existing Identity could not contain.

She arrived in leadership with a particular Identity: economist, technocrat, credentialled professional who had navigated the corridors of international financial institutions. That Identity was real and hard-won. It had produced genuine Results. It was also, in the context of post-war Liberia, insufficient.

Her exile, the years spent outside Liberia after she spoke out against a military dictatorship, forced a confrontation she had not chosen. Stripped of institutional affiliation and the professional Identity that came with it, she had to ask a more fundamental question: who am I when the credentials are removed? What she found was not a technocrat. It was a Liberian committed to freedom, a woman who had risked everything for a principle, an activist whose relationship to her country ran deeper than any role she had held within it.

When she returned and was elected president in 2005, Liberia was fourteen years out of civil war – broken socially, economically, and spiritually. The Identity she needed to inhabit was not the one she had arrived with. She needed to hold multiple Identities simultaneously: reformer, negotiator

with international powers, symbol of a new possibility for African women, and something closer to a mother figure for a traumatised nation. None of those were on her original CV.

What reorganised her Identity was not self-examination. It was Commitment. The Commitment to Liberian freedom and renewal, made in conditions that made it costly, required a different Identity. The Identity followed. That is the direction of causality that this book is tracing, and Sirleaf's life demonstrates it precisely.

Identity as a Warehouse of Undeclared Commitments

Identity is best understood as a warehouse of unexamined Commitments.

This framing is more precise than the conventional picture of Identity as personality or values – and more useful for leaders, because it points to the mechanism rather than simply naming the phenomenon.

When a leader's Identity is organised around being seen as competent, they are not simply describing a preference. They are carrying a Commitment – one that is organising their occurrences, their Being, and their Actions without ever having been made explicit. That undeclared Commitment will determine what they can say in a Board meeting, whether they can genuinely ask for help, whether they can name a problem before they have a solution, and whether they can declare a future they do not yet know how to reach.

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory adds a group-level dimension to this picture. A significant part of any leader's Identity is derived not from individual psychology alone, but from the groups they belong to – professional, organisational, national, cultural. Leaders function as prototypical representatives of those groups. When a leader's Identity shifts, the group's sense of itself shifts with it. This is why Identity change at the top produces disproportionate organisational ripple – and why leaders who refuse to examine their Identity inadvertently freeze the organisation's sense of what is possible.

The diagnostic question this surfaces is direct: what undeclared Commitments are embedded in my Identity, and in my organisation's Identity, that are making the Predictable Future feel inevitable?

The question that sits at the heart of this chapter, and that recurs throughout any genuine leadership transformation is this:

Am I willing to lose the organisation I know – and the Identity I built within it – to create the organisation the future requires?

I encountered this mechanism directly in my years leading Z Energy, and I encountered it in a form that took me longer than I would like to admit to name accurately.

When a leader's performance needed intervention – when the evidence was present, the pattern was clear, and the conversation was overdue – I would find myself in what I came to call the Waiting Place. Not inaction through laziness or avoidance in any simple sense. Something considerably more sophisticated than that.

The Waiting Place is where Identity goes to invent reasons not to act, and it is extraordinarily productive.

You know you are in the Waiting Place when you:

- Justify your own inaction.
- Hope someone else will notice and deal with the situation.
- Rationalise not doing what you know you really should.
- Think that making a big deal out of it isn't worth it.

The logic it generates is impeccable. The timing is not quite right. In my case, the leader is under pressure from other directions and another conversation now would compound that. The data is clear but not yet unambiguous enough to be fair. The relationship is at a delicate point. There are three other priorities this week that genuinely require attention first. Each of those reasons was, in isolation, plausible. Some of them were even accurate. Collectively, they were the work of an Identity committed to being liked, generating the intellectual justification for a delay that the Identity required but that the Commitment to performance could not honestly support.

What I eventually recognised – not quickly, and not without the help of people willing to name what they were observing – was that the Waiting Place was not a place of careful judgement. It was a place of Identity protection wearing the clothes of careful judgement. The performance

conversation I was not having was not being deferred because the timing was genuinely wrong. It was being deferred because having it directly, at the moment it was needed, would risk the relationship in ways the desire-to-be-liked Identity was committed to preventing.

The cost was real and organisational. Every week spent in the Waiting Place was a week the person in question did not receive the intervention they needed. A week their team lived with a performance gap that was visible to them even when it was being managed carefully from above. A week the organisation's standard quietly adjusted downward to accommodate what was not being addressed.

Identity protection does not announce itself as protection. It announces itself as wisdom, as timing, as care for the person, as responsible leadership. The Waiting Place is where those announcements are generated – fluently, convincingly, and in service of an undeclared Commitment that has nothing to do with the person whose performance needs addressing and everything to do with the leader's need to remain liked.

The Feared Self

Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius's Possible Selves Theory adds a dimension that Social Identity Theory does not fully address: the role of the future in organising present Identity.

Their research proposes that Identity is not only about who we believe we are today. It is also organised around the selves we imagine we might become, both desired and feared. The desired self is familiar territory for most leaders. The feared self receives far less examination, and it is doing at least as much organising work.

The feared self is the version of the leader they are implicitly committed to not becoming. The controlling boss. The leader who loses relevance when the organisation moves on. The executive who is exposed, under pressure, as less capable than everyone believed.

Because the avoidance is implicit and rarely named, it shapes behaviour with remarkable consistency. Leaders who fear being seen as weak will be systematically harder than the situation requires. Leaders who fear exposure will over-prepare and over-qualify in ways that slow decisions and signal distrust. Leaders who fear losing influence will find it structurally almost impossible to genuinely develop the people below them, because genuine development requires the leader to become less necessary, and that is precisely what the feared self is committed to preventing.

What looks like a leadership style is often, beneath the surface, a decades-long project of not becoming someone the leader is afraid of Being.

The style is real. The undeclared Commitment driving it has never been examined.

The practical tool from Markus and Nurius is worth using before the next consequential conversation. Write both stories in full: the leader you most want to become, and the leader you most fear becoming. Then examine your actual behaviour against each. The habits pulling you toward the feared self are the ones most likely to have been running – quietly, efficiently, and with serious organisational consequences – without ever being named.

Identity at the Organisational Level

Identity does not only operate at the individual level. Organisations develop Identities – accumulated stories about who they are, what they stand for, and what kind of organisation they must remain in order to be credible – that operate with the same structural conservatism as individual Identity.

That is not how we operate here. We have always been a company that... Our culture is defined by...

These are not facts. They are expressions of organisational Identity doing its primary work: preserving coherence with the past. Under pressure, organisational Identity tightens just as individual Identity does. The range of what occurs as possible narrows. Actions that might interrupt the Predictable Future start occurring as reckless, or naive, or simply not us.

The most significant consequence for Boards and senior leaders is this: an organisation's Identity will silently renegotiate every declared strategic direction, every transformation programme, every new Commitment – reshaping each one back into a range the existing Identity can accommodate.

The strategy document changes. The Identity does not, and so the Results remain, in their fundamental trajectory, predictable.

Indra Nooyi's leadership at PepsiCo illustrates what it takes to interrupt this. When she became CEO in 2006 and launched the *Performance with Purpose* strategy, she was not asking PepsiCo to examine its Identity. She was making a Commitment – to health, sustainability, and long-term value over short-term returns – that the existing Identity could not simply absorb. The Commitment created structural tension. The Identity had to reorganise around it. That reorganisation took years and was actively resisted. But the Commitment held. And the Identity eventually followed.

The AI Inflection Point

There is a contemporary pressure bearing on Identity that deserves explicit treatment, because it is arriving faster than most leaders are examining it, and because it exposes the cost of past-based Identity with a precision and speed that previous technological shifts did not.

Artificial intelligence does not threaten the competent leader. It threatens the leader whose Identity is built around being the most knowledgeable, most analytical, or most decisive person in the room.

Consider what AI does well. It synthesises large volumes of information faster than any individual can. It identifies patterns across data sets that human analysis would take weeks to produce. It generates options, drafts, scenarios, and recommendations with a fluency and speed that makes the leader who has always been the source of answers structurally less necessary. Not less valuable as a human being. Less necessary as the particular kind of leader whose Identity has been organised around expertise, certainty, and being the one others defer to when the question is hard.

The preconditioned behaviours Chapter 4 examines – competence performance, rescue behaviour, strategic hedging – are precisely the behaviours AI replicates first and replicates faster. The leader who cannot afford to be seen not knowing is now operating alongside a tool that always knows more, retrieves it faster, and does not require credit for the answer. The leader who rescues by providing the solution others could not find is now working in an environment where the solution is increasingly available without them. The leader who hedges every Commitment in optionality language is now competing with systems that can generate ten versions of every option before the meeting has ended.

None of this is catastrophic for leaders whose Identity is genuinely future-based. The leader who is Being curious rather than certain, who leads from declared Commitment rather than demonstrated

expertise, who creates the conditions for others to think rather than positioning themselves as the source of the best thinking – that leader's value does not decrease as AI takes over the downstream analytical work. It increases. Because what AI cannot replicate is the upstream work: the declaration of a Generated Future that cannot be justified by the evidence AI is processing, the Commitment that reorganises a system around what has been stood for rather than what the data recommends, the occurring-design that shapes how an entire organisation experiences its own possibilities.

The question AI surfaces for every leader reading this book is not: will I be replaced? It is: what is my Identity actually organised around, and is that organisation becoming more or less structurally relevant as the environment changes?

If the honest answer is that the Identity has been organised substantially around being the expert, the analyst, the decisive one, the solver – then AI is not the threat. The Identity is. AI has simply made that cost visible in a way that the previous decade did not.

Here is the closing move that matters. AI is not a challenge a leader can opt out of examining. It is, for the first time in most leaders' careers, a Commitment that is forced rather than chosen – a future that the organisation did not declare and cannot elect to bypass. That forced Commitment is already reorganising Identity across every organisation, whether the leaders inside those organisations are examining it or not. Leaders who ignore it will find their Identity reorganised by default, around whatever the AI-shaped environment rewards, rather than around what they have deliberately declared.

Leaders who examine it have a different option. They can author the reorganisation. They can ask, with the precision this chapter has been developing: what does the AI-shaped future require of who I need to be, and what does my current Identity need to release in order to become that? That is not a technology question. It is an Identity question. It is, in fact, the question this entire book is built on, surfaced now by a specific contemporary pressure that is making the cost of not asking it undeniable.

The leaders who thrive in the AI era will not be those who understand AI best.

They will be those whose Identity is most deliberately organised around a future that AI cannot generate for them, because it requires the one thing no system can produce: a human being willing to declare what they stand for before the evidence exists that it is safe to do so.

I have encountered this pattern repeatedly in my coaching practice, and I have encountered it personally. The question that arrives most often – rarely stated directly, almost always present – is not *will AI replace my organisation?* It is quieter and more confronting than that. It is: *could AI replace me?*

For leaders whose Identity has been organised around expertise, analytical rigour, or the authority that comes from being the most informed person in a consequential conversation, that question does not feel like a technology question. It feels like an Identity crisis, because it is one.

My own confrontation with it was direct. As an executive coach, a meaningful portion of what I once did – accessing wisdom, synthesising frameworks, preparing materials, generating options, drafting communications – is now done faster and often better by AI systems. The honest answer to *could AI replace me?* was: some of what I have been doing, yes. Even to the extent that all of what I am doing could be available through a client's own AI.

What that question forced was not a defence of my existing practice. It forced a more precise examination of what I am actually committed to. Not the activities, but the impact. Not the role, but the future.

I currently work with fifteen AI agents, none of which relate to workflow in the way that many agents are deployed. I have developed an AI infrastructure for my practice – systems I have designed and refined to extend my reach, sharpen my thinking, and free the hours that previously went to production work for the work that requires a human being: the coaching conversation that holds a leader's Identity up to the light, the question that stops rather than informs, the Commitment that is authored in relationship rather than generated by a system.

That reorganisation did not begin with a technology decision. It began with an Identity question: what am I for, if not the activities AI can now perform? The answer – realising individual and organisational potential through the quality of my presence, my thinking, and my Commitment to each leader's generated future – was always the answer. AI simply made it necessary to be precise about it rather than leaving it implicit beneath the busyness of production.

That is the move this section is asking of every leader reading this book. Not a technology strategy. An Identity audit. Not how do I respond to AI? Instead, what am I actually committed to – and

does my current Identity serve that Commitment, or has it been serving the activities that AI is now making redundant?

The Operating Primer Connection

In the Operating Primer's sequence, Identity sits above Context and above Action. It is the structure that stabilises the Predictable Future – because as long as Identity remains intact, Context will align with it, and Action will remain coherent with what the existing story makes obvious.

Generating a different future does not begin with examining Identity. It begins one level further upstream. It begins with a Commitment that exerts more organising force on the system than the existing Identity does.

That is the subject of Chapter 5. Before arriving there, Chapter 4 examines what Identity looks like in action under pressure: the preconditioned behaviours that are Identity's most reliable and most costly expression.

Write Your Own Chapter

- What is the dominant story you carry about who you are as a leader? Where did it come from, and what undeclared Commitments are embedded in it?
- Map the groups you most strongly belong to in your leadership context. What does that membership make obvious, and what does it systematically exclude?
- Write your desired self and your feared self in full. Which of your current behaviours is the feared self organising – without your conscious instruction?
- Where is your Identity currently functioning as a resource, and where is it functioning as a cage you have mistaken for character?
- What would your organisation need to stop protecting about itself for the next chapter of its story to become available?

Chapter 4

Preconditioned Behaviours – When the Script Runs the Leader

Name the behaviour that appears when pressure rises. Now ask: did you choose it, or did it just arrive?

Chapter 3 established that Identity is a warehouse of undeclared Commitments – the accumulated story of who a leader has learned they must be. This chapter examines what that looks like in Action.

Preconditioned behaviours are the patterns that Identity produces under pressure. They are not character flaws. They are, at their origin, intelligent adaptations – the responses that once worked reliably enough to be repeated, and were repeated often enough to become automatic. By the time most leaders encounter them in a serious coaching conversation, they no longer feel like choices. They feel like personality.

That is the central problem. Not the behaviour itself, but the invisibility of it. The leader who always rescues a struggling situation believes they are being helpful. The leader who smooths tension before it can produce genuine confrontation believes they are being composed. The leader who over-prepares to the point of slowing decisions believes they are being rigorous. None of them are wrong about the surface description. They are wrong about the driver beneath it.

The driver is Identity, doing precisely what Chapter 3 said it would: conserving a version of the leader that once worked, in conditions that may no longer exist.

What makes preconditioned behaviours particularly costly at the senior level is they feel like competence. They have been practised long enough, rewarded consistently enough, and refined sufficiently that they no longer resemble the adaptations they once were. They have become indistinguishable from character. Which is precisely why they are so rarely examined, and why they

are the primary mechanism through which capable, well-intentioned leaders produce Results that are more predictable than they need to be.

Metaphor: The Well-Worn Path

Picture a field of tall grass. The first time you cross it, you push through with effort, uncertain of the best route. By the tenth crossing, a path is forming. By the hundredth, it feels like the only way across – not because other routes do not exist, but because this one requires no thought at all.

Preconditioned behaviours are that well-worn path. They are efficient, they are reliable, and they produce a result – consistently enough to feel like the right response rather than a habitual one. What they also do is foreclose other routes. Routes that might serve the future better, but require the discomfort of walking into uncharted grass.

The path is not the problem. Walking it unconsciously, in every condition, regardless of what the terrain now requires – that is the problem. And walking it unconsciously is precisely what Drift looks like at the behavioural level.

Case Study: Satya Nadella and Microsoft's Cultural Reset

When Satya Nadella became CEO of Microsoft in 2014, the company's preconditioned behaviours had become its primary competitive liability. The culture had developed what he later described as a know-it-all environment: being the most knowledgeable person in the room was the operating currency, defending your position was structurally rewarded, and admitting uncertainty was read as weakness. Those behaviours had been reinforced across thousands of decisions, promotions, and leadership moments until they no longer felt like a culture. They felt like the natural order of things.

The diagnosis Nadella made was precise: this was not a strategy problem. It was a behavioural problem operating at the level of Identity. Microsoft did not need a better plan for the cloud era. It needed to interrupt the script that was making bold bets organisationally unthinkable.

His intervention was deceptively simple in form and profoundly difficult in execution. Drawing on Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset, he introduced a single reframe – from know-it-all to learn-it-all. However, the reframe carried weight only because Nadella embodied it personally, consistently, in the moments that most people were watching. He asked questions rather than providing answers in meetings where the culture expected the CEO to perform certainty. He spoke openly about what he did not know. He named the experience of raising his son Zain, who has

cerebral palsy, and named the empathy that experience had produced in him as a leadership asset rather than a private matter.

He was not performing a new style. He was inhabiting a different way of Being – and doing so visibly enough, persistently enough, and under enough pressure that the new behaviour accumulated the social permission required to become a norm.

What made it work was not the reframe itself. It was the Commitment behind it. Nadella had made a stand – publicly, irreversibly, at the moment of maximum exposure – for a different kind of organisation. That Commitment reorganised what he was willing to risk, what he was willing to model, and therefore what became occurring as possible for those around him. The preconditioned behaviours of the know-it-all culture did not simply evaporate. They lost their structural support as the Commitment of the organisation's most visible leader stopped reinforcing them.

That is the direction of causality this book is tracing. Commitment reorganises Identity. Identity reorganises Being. Being reorganises the occurrences that make preconditioned behaviours feel inevitable or optional.

The Mechanism: The Ladder of Inference

Understanding why preconditioned behaviours are so resistant to change, even when the leader is fully aware of them, requires a mechanism. The clearest is the Ladder of Inference, developed by Chris Argyris and extended by Peter Senge.

The Ladder maps the mental sequence through which leaders move from observing a situation to taking Action. The steps are: observe data from the environment; select certain data from everything available; add meaning to what has been selected, based on past experience and Identity; make assumptions from that meaning; draw conclusions; form or reinforce beliefs; and act.

The entire sequence can happen in seconds. At every step, Identity determines what gets selected, what meaning gets added, and what conclusions feel obvious rather than constructed.

The result is that preconditioned behaviour does not feel like a pattern. It feels like perception. A leader who learned early in their career that silence signals disapproval will experience a quiet room as a warning, and act accordingly, without ever noticing that the interpretation is theirs rather than the room's. The behaviour that follows is entirely coherent from inside the Ladder. It is also entirely invisible as a choice.

Argyris called the reinforcing dynamic a self-sealing loop: the belief generates behaviour, the behaviour produces a result, the result confirms the belief. Each cycle makes the belief harder to question because it appears empirically validated. The Ladder runs faster with every repetition. Eventually the leader is not choosing a response to the situation. They are executing a response that their accumulated history has already filed under obviously correct.

The diagnostic value of the Ladder is that it makes the steps explicit – which creates the possibility of interruption. At which step did an assumption get treated as a fact? What data was available but not selected? What would a different interpretation make possible? These are not abstract questions. They are the precise leverage points at which a brief pause can interrupt a pattern that has been running, unexamined, for years.

How Preconditioned Behaviours Show Up at Senior Levels

The specific content of preconditioned behaviours changes with seniority. The mechanism does not.

At the executive and Board level, the costliest scripts are rarely the obvious ones. They are subtler, more defended, and more expensive precisely because they have been reinforced by decades of success and mistaken for competence.

1. Conflict smoothing: the leader who redirects tension before it can produce genuine confrontation. This is almost always praised as composure and emotional intelligence. What it systematically prevents is the quality of debate that genuinely difficult decisions require. The organisation learns not to bring the sharpest version of a disagreement into the room, because the room will not hold it.
2. Competence performance: the leader who cannot afford to be seen not knowing. In early career this produced credibility. At the top it produces a culture where uncertainty cannot be surfaced honestly, which means the organisation's true risk picture is perpetually partial.
3. Rescue behaviour: the leader whose Identity is built around solving what others cannot. This is experienced by others as generosity and capability. Its systemic effect is a team that never fully develops, because the leader's script requires being needed, and genuine development requires making the leader progressively less necessary.
4. Strategic hedging: the leader who frames every Commitment in optionality language. This presents as sophistication and prudence. Its actual function is to protect the leader from the exposure that a declared, specific future would produce, which is precisely the exposure that a Generated Future requires.

None of these are failures of character. They are scripts that earned their place, running past the conditions that justified them, now producing the Predictable Future the leader says they want to move beyond. Because they have been practised long enough to feel like character, they will not change through awareness alone. They will change when a Commitment is made that requires something different, and that is strong enough to hold under the pressure that most reliably activates the old script.

Pressure Reveals the Lived System

This is the second explicit statement of a principle introduced in Chapter 2, and it deserves to be named directly here because preconditioned behaviours are precisely what pressure reveals.

What a leader does when the conversation turns difficult, when the Board pushes back, when the numbers are not moving – that is the truest expression of their actual Identity and their actual Commitments. Not what they declared in the offsite. Not what they agreed to in the coaching session. What runs automatically, under conditions most likely to justify the old script.

Every organisation has a stated culture and a pressure culture. In most organisations, these are not the same.

The stated culture is what leaders describe when asked. The pressure culture is what the organisation produces when difficulty arrives. The gap between them is not a communication problem or an alignment problem. It is an Identity problem, and above that, a Commitment problem.

The preconditioned behaviours of the leadership team are the pressure culture made visible. Addressing them at the behavioural level – naming them, discussing them, committing to do better – will produce temporary movement and then reversion. Addressing them at the Identity level will produce more durable movement. However, the only structural intervention that reorganises them permanently is a Commitment that makes the old behaviour untenable – not because it has been prohibited, but because it contradicts what has been declared.

The Believe-Behave-Become Loop

There is a complementary model worth naming here, because it describes the same dynamic from a generative rather than diagnostic direction.

The believe-behave-become sequence proposes that beliefs shape behaviour, and behaviour over time shapes who we become. Applied in reverse, it explains how preconditioned behaviour forms: past experience generated beliefs about what works and who we need to be; those beliefs generated consistent behaviours; those behaviours, repeated, consolidated an Identity. The loop is self-reinforcing in both directions, which means it can be worked in both directions.

A leader who wants to shift a preconditioned behaviour cannot begin by changing the behaviour alone. The belief that generated it will reassert itself, especially under pressure, when the familiar path is most available and most appealing. The work begins one level upstream: examining the belief. And the belief is always, at its root, an Identity claim. I am the person who holds things together. I am the expert in this room. I am the one others rely on when it gets difficult. Each of those claims is generating behaviour. Each of those behaviours is producing Results.

The believe-behave-become model does not fully name this point, however, examining the belief is not sufficient to change it. What changes it is a Commitment that requires a different belief to be true. The Commitment comes first. The believe-behave-become loop then runs in the new direction.

A Practical Tool: The Identity Declaration

Naming the stances a situation requires is necessary. It is not sufficient. A stance named in a quiet moment of reflection has not yet been tested against the conditions most likely to undo it. The gap between a declared Identity and an inhabited one is not closed by insight. It is closed by Commitment that has been stress-tested against reality before reality arrives.

The Identity Declaration is a precision tool for doing exactly that. It takes the following form:

In this meeting / role / situation, I will be [A], [B] and [C] – even if [consequence I fear], even when [circumstance that will arise], and even though [tension I am already carrying].

The Being words come first. You name the stances the situation requires – builder, challenger, steward, direct, uncompromising, patient – choosing language specific to the context. Courageous

is too broad. Someone who names the performance issue directly, in the room, without softening it first, that is workable.

The stress tests follow. Each of the three conditions does distinct work.

Even if surfaces the consequence most feared. Even if the relationship cools. Even if the Board pushes back. Even if it turns out I am wrong. This is where image protection lives. If you cannot complete this clause honestly, the Being words have not yet been chosen, they have been wished for.

Even when names the circumstance most likely to trigger reversion. Even when the room goes quiet. Even when a peer challenges me publicly. Even when the pressure to close the conversation early becomes acute. This is where inherited Identity reasserts itself most reliably. Naming the circumstance in advance reduces its power to operate unconsciously.

Even though acknowledges the tension already present. Even though I have avoided this conversation three times. Even though I am not certain I am right. Even though my relationship with this person is already strained. This clause prevents the Declaration from becoming performance. It requires honesty about what is actually being brought into the room.

A complete Declaration might read: In this performance conversation, I will be direct, fair and unwavering – even if the executive becomes defensive and the relationship cools, even when I feel the pull to soften the feedback and restore ease, and even though I have let this drift longer than I should have.

The process is often circular. The Being words are named, the stress tests are developed, and the stress tests reveal the Being words were not quite right – that what was written was the version of courage that felt acceptable rather than the version the situation requires. That circularity is not a problem. It is the point. A Declaration that has survived several iterations of stress-testing is an authentic Commitment. One that has not is an intention. Under pressure, the difference between the two is everything.

Before any consequential meeting, write the Declaration in full. All three clauses. Do not abbreviate. The discipline of completing each condition is where Commitment becomes real rather than rhetorical.

The most consistent version of this script in my own leadership had a particular signature that I eventually learned to recognise, though not before it had run expensively in a number of situations.

The conditions were specific. Performance was clearly off, not catastrophically, not in ways that created an urgent crisis, but measurably and visibly short of what the role required. The person, however, was working extraordinarily hard. The effort was genuine, the intention beyond question, and the commitment to the organisation evident in everything except the Results.

That combination – clear performance gap, genuine effort, visible commitment – was the precise condition most likely to activate the softening script. Not because I could not see the gap, but because the gap was occurring to me through the lens of the effort, and that occurring made direct intervention feel like a betrayal of someone who was giving everything they had.

The behaviour that followed was entirely coherent from inside that occurring. I would find reasons to extend the timeframe. I would frame the feedback in ways that preserved the person's confidence while softening the standard. I would focus the conversation on what was working before addressing what was not, and then find that the conversation had run out of time or energy before the most important part had been said clearly enough to land.

What I was protecting, beneath each of those moves, was my own need to be seen as fair, as supportive, as the kind of leader who recognised effort and did not simply manage by numbers. That is not an unreasonable thing to want to be. The problem is that the desire to be seen that way was reorganising the conversation before it began, and producing a version of leadership that felt supportive and was, in the most consequential sense, not.

The person deserved the direct conversation. They deserved to know, clearly and early enough to do something about it, exactly where the performance was falling short and what was required to close the gap. What they received, in the Waiting Place, was a carefully managed version of that conversation – one that protected my Identity while leaving them without the information they most needed.

Pressure reveals the script. What the desire-to-be-liked Identity produced, reliably, under the specific pressure of a hard-working person whose Results were insufficient, was a softened standard delivered in the language of support. That is one of the most expensive scripts available to a senior leader. And it ran, for longer than it should have, before I could see it clearly enough to interrupt it.

The Developmental Lens: Kegan's Stages

A deeper account of why preconditioned behaviours persist – despite intelligence, coaching, and genuine intent to shift – comes from Robert Kegan's Constructive-Developmental Theory.

Kegan maps how adults grow through successive stages of meaning-making. Three are directly relevant.

At the Socialised Mind, leaders are largely shaped by the expectations of the environment around them – their organisation, peers, professional culture, and history of what has been rewarded. These leaders can be highly capable and deeply loyal, but their sense of what is right is heavily externally referenced. They tend to struggle acutely when the environment's expectations conflict with what the situation genuinely requires.

At the Self-Authoring Mind, leaders have constructed their own internal framework – values, principles, a perspective that can examine external expectations and decide which to honour. They can hold a position under pressure. They can disagree with the room without losing their footing.

At the Self-Transforming Mind, leaders hold even their own hard-won frameworks as partial and revisable. They can sit with paradox, hold multiple perspectives without collapsing to one, and adapt across fundamentally different contexts without losing coherence.

Kegan's most significant finding, supported by decades of research, is that the majority of adults in leadership roles operate at the Socialised Mind, and a substantial proportion remain there regardless of seniority or experience. The Socialised Mind can run an organisation effectively under stable conditions. Under genuine complexity, disruption, or the requirement for transformation, it reaches its structural limit. It executes inside the existing frame with considerable competence. It cannot question the frame.

In Operating Primer terms: the Socialised Mind produces a Predictable Future almost automatically, because the leader's Identity is organised around external validation, and external validation consistently rewards the familiar. Moving to a Generated Future requires at minimum a Self-Authoring Mind. And the move to the Self-Authoring Mind is not made through experience or insight alone. It is made through Commitment – a stand taken from inside the leader's own developing framework, rather than from what the environment rewards.

Kegan's stages map the developmental sequence. The Identity Declaration provides a practice for moving through it.

The Operating Primer Connection

In the Operating Primer, Identity sits above Context, which sits above Action. Preconditioned behaviours are the mechanism through which Identity produces Action – reliably, automatically, and mostly without deliberate choice.

This is why intervening at the Action level alone rarely produces lasting change. Changing what a leader does, without changing who they are Being, produces the compliance that looks like development and delivers none of its Results. The behaviour shifts in the coaching session, in the 360 feedback conversation, in the week after the offsite. Then pressure arrives, the Ladder runs, the well-worn path calls, and the script reasserts.

Genuine shift begins upstream. In Identity, the story being protected. In Context, what the situation is being allowed to mean. Above both, in Commitment, whether a Generated Future is actually organising choices or whether aspiration is being mistaken for declaration.

The Identity Declaration works precisely because it operates at all three levels simultaneously. It names the Being required (Identity). It anticipates the conditions that will make the old script feel justified (Context). And it converts a named intention into a stress-tested Commitment.

That is the upstream intervention. The next chapter examines the force that makes it real.

Write Your Own Chapter

- Name one preconditioned behaviour that runs reliably under pressure. Trace it back: what belief is generating it, and what Identity claim is that belief protecting?
- Apply the Ladder of Inference to a recent decision that happened quickly. At which step did interpretation become fact, and what data was not selected?
- Where on Kegan's developmental map are you operating in the contexts that matter most? What would the next stage require you to examine about the frameworks you currently rely on?
- Write a full Identity Declaration for your next consequential meeting or conversation. Complete all three clauses without abbreviating. What did the stress-testing reveal about whether your Being words were chosen or merely wished for?
- What preconditioned behaviour in your organisation has been mistaken for culture, for competence, or simply for the way things are done here?

Chapter 5

Commitment: The Force That Reorganises Everything

You do not re-author your Identity. You author a Commitment strong enough that your Identity has to reorganise around it.

Think about the moment you became a parent. Or if you have not, think about the moment someone you know did, and the person you watched change in the weeks and months that followed.

Before the child arrived, you understood, intellectually, that things would change. You had been told. You may have read about it, prepared for it, planned for it. You adjusted your schedule, your finances, perhaps your living arrangements. You thought you were ready.

None of that preparation reorganised your Identity. Not one piece of it.

The reorganisation happened the moment the Commitment became real and irrevocable. Not the decision to have a child – that decision, however considered, left the future still theoretical. The moment that changed everything was the moment retreat became structurally unavailable. When the child was placed in your arms, or handed to you, or first seen on a monitor – and the future arrived, without permission and without a trial period, as simply the only future now available.

From that moment, without any deliberate act of will, the occurring of situations changed. A late-night work commitment that had previously seemed non-negotiable began occurring differently. A risk that had been entirely acceptable the week before began occurring as reckless. Priorities that had organised your decisions for years reorganised, not because you decided to reorganise them, but because a Commitment of sufficient force had been made – and the Identity had no structural option but to follow.

This is the mechanism Chapter 5 is built on. Not the decision to change, not the insight that change is necessary, and not the plan for how change will be managed. The Commitment –

irrevocable, made in conditions of incomplete information and uncertain outcome – that makes the Identity's existing organisation untenable.

Most leaders treat the reorganisation of Identity as the precondition for making a Commitment. They wait until they feel ready, until the Identity feels aligned with the declared direction, until the person they need to be feels sufficiently available before they declare what they are standing for. Parenthood demonstrates, with a clarity no framework can quite match, that the sequence is reversed. The Commitment is made first – before readiness, before certainty, before the Identity has reorganised to accommodate it. The Identity follows. It has no choice.

This is what genuine Commitment does to a system. It does not wait for the conditions to be right. It creates the conditions, by making the retreat to the Predictable Future structurally unavailable, and by leaving the Identity with no option but to organise itself around what has been declared.

When did you last make a Commitment of that force in your leadership?

Chapters 1 through 4 have traced a precise causal sequence. How situations are occurring to a leader shapes every Action they take. Who they are Being in response determines what Results become possible. Identity is the accumulated story that organises both occurring and Being before deliberate choice arrives. Preconditioned behaviours are what Identity produces under pressure – efficiently, automatically, and almost entirely without examination.

That sequence explains the Predictable Future with considerable precision. It explains why capable, well-intentioned leaders continue producing Results that are more predictable than they need to be. It explains why insight does not produce lasting change. It explains why the well-worn path calls loudest at exactly the moment when something different is most required.

What it does not yet explain is how the sequence is interrupted.

The answer is not better awareness. It is not more rigorous self-examination, more sophisticated feedback, or a more accurate understanding of the preconditioned behaviours running in the background. All of those are necessary, but none of them are sufficient. The system does not reorganise through understanding. It reorganises through Commitment.

This is the central claim of this chapter, and it is worth stating precisely before anything else: you do not re-author your Identity directly. You author a Commitment strong enough that your Identity has to reorganise around it. The Commitment comes first. Identity follows. Being follows Identity. Occurring follows Being. Action follows occurring. Results follow Action.

That is the direction of causality. Working it in reverse – trying to change Results by adjusting Action, or trying to change Being by examining Identity – produces movement within the existing system. It does not generate a new one.

What Commitment Actually Is

Commitment is one of the most misused words in leadership. It appears in strategy documents, performance reviews, values statements, and team charters with such frequency that it has lost most of its structural meaning. What most organisations call Commitment is, on close examination, something else entirely.

Intensity is not Commitment. Wanting something more strongly, communicating it more clearly, or pursuing it with greater urgency does not constitute a Commitment. Intensity without structural declaration simply amplifies the existing system. Desire does not reorganise Identity.

Agreement is not Commitment. A team that aligns verbally around a goal – that nods, that uses the right language, that produces a strategy deck reflecting the shared direction – has not necessarily made a Commitment. Agreement without personal destabilisation produces compliance.

Compliance executes inside the existing frame. It cannot generate a new one.

Targets are not Commitment. Targets measure outcomes and clarify what success looks like. They are indispensable as management tools. They do not, however, reorganise meaning. A target can coexist with a fully intact Predictable Future. Leaders can speak about targets with conviction, urgency can rise, effort can increase, and the system remains organised around the same Identity it always was.

Commitment is something different in kind, not just degree. Commitment is a declared stand that alters the meaning of the present. It is a declaration of a future that reorganises behaviour before evidence exists – that creates consequence in advance of proof.

When a Commitment is genuine, certain things happen that do not happen with intensity, agreement, or targets. Certain options close. Trade-offs become visible that were previously

avoidable. Identity is destabilised, not gently, but structurally. Context widens or shifts. Action reorganises itself around what has been declared, not around what feels safe.

Commitment introduces structural tension into the system. Without that tension, nothing reorganises. The system improves, adjusts, and optimises. It does not transform.

A useful test: If a Commitment has no consequence, it is not a Commitment. It is a preference wearing Commitment's language.

The Commitment that most directly interrupted the desire-to-be-liked Identity in my own leadership was not a single decision. It was a Commitment made in the early 2000s – before Z Energy existed, before I had the language of the Operating Primer to describe what I was standing for – that leadership development was not a benefit or a cultural amenity. It was the primary mechanism through which extraordinary performance became possible and sustainable.

That Commitment, held across organisations from 2000 onwards and eventually across the thirteen years of Z Energy's life, required something the desire-to-be-liked Identity consistently resisted: being direct, in the moments that mattered, about the gap between where a leader was and where they needed to be. Genuine development is not comfortable for the person being developed. It requires someone willing to name what the person cannot yet see about themselves, which is precisely the conversation the Waiting Place was designed to prevent.

The Commitment to leadership development reorganised that. Not immediately, and not without the ongoing pressure of the Identity reasserting itself in specific situations. However, it reorganised it structurally, because the Commitment was strong enough to make the softened conversation untenable. If I was genuinely committed to developing this person, the comfortable version of the feedback was not development. It was its opposite.

The stress-testing of that Commitment arrived in forms that will be familiar to anyone who has tried to sustain investment in leadership development inside a commercial organisation under pressure.

The cost argument arrives first and arrives regularly. Leadership development is expensive, the return is difficult to measure with the precision finance requires, and in any given cost reduction

cycle it presents as the most defensible cut. The people doing the cutting are not wrong that it is expensive. They are wrong that the return is not there, but the return is upstream, in the Identity and Commitment and Context that produce Results, and most financial frameworks are designed to measure downstream.

The results argument arrives second. Not everyone who goes through leadership development changes. Some people attend, engage genuinely in the room, and return to the operating environment where the Context remains unchanged, and the development does not hold. That is real, and it is used consistently to question whether the investment is working. The honest response is that development without Context change will always have limited durability, which is an argument for also changing the Context, not for abandoning the development.

The culture argument arrives third, and it is the most revealing: *We need more management around here, not more soft stuff.* That sentence, in various forms, arrived at Z and arrives in almost every organisation where genuine leadership development is being sustained against commercial pressure. It is the organisational Identity speaking, the collective story about what real performance requires, and it is doing precisely what Chapter 7 describes: mounting an immune response to the intervention that threatens its coherence.

At Z Energy, in the first three years, everyone from the most senior leader to the newest frontline employee received a minimum of three days of leadership development annually, costing \$2m each year. Not skills training, but leadership development – the kind that asks who you are being, what you are committed to, and what your Identity is preventing. That investment was questioned in every budget cycle. It was sustained in every budget cycle. Not because the cost arguments were not real, but because the Commitment was stronger than the pressure to abandon it.

That is what a Commitment that reorganises Identity looks like in practice. Not a single dramatic declaration, but a stand held consistently through the specific, recurring, entirely predictable pressures that arrive to test whether it is genuine. The desire-to-be-liked Identity did not disappear. However, it could not reorganise the leadership development conversation because the Commitment to genuine development had made the comfortable, softened version of that conversation structurally incompatible with what had been declared.

The Identity followed the Commitment. Not all at once. Over thirteen years, in hundreds of conversations where the Commitment required something the Identity would have preferred to avoid.

That is the sequence this chapter is built on. The Commitment first, then the Identity reorganisation as its consequence.

The Three Misreads That Preserve the Predictable Future

The most expensive errors in organisational leadership are rarely strategic. They are definitional. Leaders believe they are committed when they are, in structural terms, interested. The distinction has significant consequences.

The first misread is treating Commitment as motivation. This produces leaders who communicate more compellingly, speak more passionately, and energise rooms more effectively – while leaving the upstream conditions entirely intact. Motivation is a below-the-line lever. It improves Action within the existing Context. Commitment is an above-the-line declaration. It changes the Context from which Action emerges.

The second misread is treating Commitment as consensus. This produces leadership teams who seek alignment before declaring, who qualify direction until everyone is comfortable, and who mistake the absence of visible resistance for the presence of genuine Commitment. Consensus-seeking is Identity-protective. It reduces the exposure of any individual declaration while producing the appearance of collective Commitment. What it actually produces is a shared responsibility for a future no one has personally stood behind.

The third misread is treating Commitment as conditional. This is the most structurally damaging misread, and the most common. Conditional Commitment sounds like genuine Commitment in almost every respect – the language is ambitious, the intention is sincere, the direction is clear. The condition, however, is almost always present: once we have more certainty, once the Board is aligned, once the market settles, once we have completed the restructure. Each of those statements means the same thing structurally: the future will determine my Commitment, rather than my Commitment determining how I engage the future.

That single inversion is the fault line between the Predictable Future and the Generated Future. Conditional Commitment is the Predictable Future wearing the language of transformation. It is the mechanism through which most organisational change initiatives gradually contract into more manageable versions of themselves, until what remains is structurally indistinguishable from what existed before.

Metaphor: The Burning Ship

In 1519, Hernán Cortés landed on the coast of what is now Mexico with six hundred men and a declared intention to conquer the Aztec Empire – the most powerful military force in the Americas, with a population forty times larger than his own force.

Before moving inland, he ordered the ships burned.

The historical record is contested on the precise mechanism, some accounts suggest scuttling rather than burning, but the structural consequence is not. He removed retreat as an available option. The future his men were standing in became the only future available. There was no survivable version of turning back.

This is not offered as a model for how to treat people, or as a celebration of conquest. It is offered as a precise illustration of what Commitment does to a system. It makes certain options structurally unavailable. Not through willpower, not through inspiration, not through the quality of the strategy, but through the removal of the path back to the Predictable Future.

Most leadership Commitments leave the ships intact. The language declares a Generated Future while the operating system preserves every route back to the Predictable Future. The organisation is told the destination has changed while the retreat remains fully resourced and easily accessed.

Genuine Commitment is not the burning of literal ships. It is the structural removal of the survivable alternative – made visible through what the leader is willing to sacrifice, what they are willing to close, and what they are no longer willing to tolerate.

Case Study: Paul Polman at Unilever

When Paul Polman became CEO of Unilever in January 2009, he made a declaration on his first day that the financial markets interpreted, almost universally, as a mistake.

He eliminated quarterly earnings guidance.

Not reduced it. Not supplemented it with longer-term metrics. Eliminated it. He told investors that if they were primarily interested in short-term returns, Unilever was not the right investment for them.

In the middle of the global financial crisis – with markets contracting, competitors defending every quarterly number, and institutional investors watching every leadership transition with particular

scrutiny – this was not a calculated risk management move. It was a Commitment, and it created exactly what genuine Commitment creates: structural tension, visible consequence, and the immediate surfacing of every Competing Commitment in the system.

The Competing Commitments appeared within days. Internal pressure to qualify the declaration. Board members who needed to manage relationships with large institutional shareholders. Analysts who covered the stock and whose models depended on quarterly guidance. Leaders inside Unilever whose own performance metrics were tied to short-term financial delivery. None of those pressures were unreasonable. All of them were expressions of the Predictable Future reasserting itself – wearing the language of prudence, responsibility, and stakeholder management.

Polman did not renegotiate the declaration. He extended it. Six months into the role, he launched the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan – a ten-year commitment to doubling the size of the business while halving its environmental footprint and improving the wellbeing of more than one billion people. The plan was announced before the business case was proven. Before the supply chain had been redesigned. Before the product portfolio had been reformulated. Before anyone could demonstrate, with evidence, that the commitment was achievable.

That was the point. Generated Futures cannot be justified by the evidence available at the moment of declaration. They are declared in advance of evidence, and the declaration is what reorganises the system to produce the evidence.

What Polman's Commitment did to Unilever's Identity over the decade that followed was structural and visible. The organisation that had defined itself primarily as a fast-moving consumer goods company optimising quarterly returns began to organise itself around a different story: a company that existed to make sustainable living commonplace. That Identity reorganisation was not smooth or linear. It required the exit of leaders whose own Identities were incompatible with the declared future. It required the redesign of supplier relationships, product formulations, and performance metrics. It required Polman personally to sustain the Commitment through shareholder pressure, a hostile takeover bid from Kraft Heinz in 2017, and repeated cycles of organisational resistance.

Through all of it, the Commitment held. Identity followed. Results followed. By the time Polman stepped down in 2019, Unilever's share price had tripled. More significantly, the organisation's Identity had been genuinely reorganised – not through a culture programme, not through a values refresh, not through a capability development initiative, but through a Commitment that the existing Identity could not simply absorb and neutralise.

Polman's case illustrates three things that are central to this chapter. First, genuine Commitment creates immediate resistance because it destabilises Identity, and Identity resists destabilisation. A Commitment that produces no resistance is not yet a Commitment. It is a direction that the existing Identity can accommodate without reorganising. Second, Competing Commitments surface immediately and must be explicitly named and overridden, not quietly managed or diplomatically balanced. Third, the Commitment reorganises Identity over time – not through persuasion or inspiration, but through the structural removal of the option to produce the Predictable Future while using the language of the Generated one.

What makes Polman's case particularly instructive for this chapter is what came after Unilever. When he stepped down in 2019, he did not moderate the Commitment to a more comfortable post-corporate position. He co-founded IMAGINE, a foundation accelerating business action on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and co-authored *Net Positive* – a book whose central argument is identical to the stand he took on his first day as CEO a decade earlier: that business must generate more value than it extracts, and that the leaders who wait for permission or commercial proof before committing to that future will never produce it.

He has been asked repeatedly whether, knowing the full cost – the institutional resistance, the hostile takeover bid, the pressure sustained across a decade – he would make the same declaration again. His answer has been consistent: yes, without qualification. That is the data point that matters most for this chapter's argument. The Commitment was not a product of Unilever's particular circumstances, its brand positioning, or its Board's patience. It was a Commitment that the person held, and that the person continued to hold when the circumstances changed entirely.

The organisation did not produce the Commitment. The Commitment produced the organisation.

That is future-based Identity in its most concrete form. Not an Identity organised around what Unilever required of him, but an Identity organised around a declared future that preceded the role, survived it, and continued beyond it.

Competing Commitments: The Hidden Architecture of the Predictable Future

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey's research on immunity to change identifies a mechanism that explains why genuine Commitment is so rarely sustained, even when it is genuinely declared.

Every significant Commitment, they found, exists alongside a set of Competing Commitments – undeclared commitments that are actively organised to prevent the declared Commitment from being fully honoured. These Competing Commitments are not acts of sabotage or deliberate resistance. They are expressions of Identity protection, operating through the same mechanism Chapter 3 described: the unexamined commitment to remaining coherent, credible, and safe in the ways that have worked before.

A leader who declares a Commitment to genuine accountability within their team will almost certainly carry a Competing Commitment to being liked, or to avoiding the relational cost of a genuinely confronting conversation. A leadership team that declares a Commitment to bold strategic risk will almost certainly carry a Competing Commitment to the kind of governance credibility that requires every decision to be justifiable in advance. An organisation that declares a Commitment to transformation will almost certainly carry a Competing Commitment to the stability of the Identity structures that transformation would need to disrupt.

Competing Commitments do not announce themselves. They present as reasonable caution, responsible stewardship, or appropriate sensitivity to context. They are, structurally, the Predictable Future's most sophisticated defence because they operate in the language of wisdom rather than the language of resistance.

The diagnostic question is direct:

What are we currently committed to preserving that is structurally incompatible with the future we have declared?

That question, asked honestly and answered completely, reveals the Competing Commitments. What it requires next is a choice – not a balance, not a managed tension, not a nuanced synthesis. A choice. Which Commitment organises the system?

The Commitment that does not survive the confrontation with its competitors was not a Commitment. It was a preference. The Commitment that does survive is the one that has the structural force to reorganise Identity.

Integrity Leakage: How Commitment Erodes

Even genuine Commitments erode. Not through a single decision to abandon them, but through the accumulation of small accommodations that individually seem reasonable and collectively hollow the Commitment out.

This is what the Operating Primer calls Integrity Leakage: the process by which Commitments weaken through qualification, conditional language, deferred timelines, silent renegotiation, and tolerated non-delivery. Each individual instance of leakage has a plausible explanation. The circumstance was genuinely unusual. The pressure was genuinely significant. The relationship needed protecting. Over time, however, the accumulation of exceptions becomes the norm. The Commitment that once organised the system is still named in the language of the organisation, still appears in strategy documents and leadership frameworks, but has lost its structural force. It no longer closes options or forces trade-offs. It has become a value rather than a Commitment.

The distinction matters. Values describe what an organisation believes. Commitments determine what it does when those beliefs are costly to honour.

Integrity Leakage is visible in specific patterns. Language that was declarative becomes aspirational. Trade-offs that were explicit become ambiguous. Timelines that were non-negotiable acquire flexibility. Behaviours that would once have been confronted are now explained and contextualised. The organisation continues to perform well in many respects. The trajectory, however, has quietly reverted to the Predictable Future. Not through a decision, but through the gradual erosion of the Commitment's structural force.

The intervention for Integrity Leakage is not recommitment, at least, not as a first step. It is honest assessment of the current state of the Commitment. Is this Commitment still operative? Are we honouring it under pressure? Where have we quietly renegotiated it without explicitly acknowledging that we have done so? If the Commitment has genuinely eroded, the honest response is to either renew it explicitly – with full acknowledgement of what eroded it and what sustaining it will now require – or to formally decommit and declare a different future. What is not available, without significant cost to organisational integrity, is the continuation of the language of Commitment while the structural force of it has dissipated.

Future-Based Identity: The Destination

There is a concept that emerges from sustained Commitment that is worth naming explicitly, because it describes the destination this entire book is pointing toward.

Most leaders derive their Identity from the past. From their history, their accumulated capability, their achievements, their expertise, and their legacy. That is the natural consequence of Identity forming the way Chapter 3 described – through repetition, reinforcement, and the conclusions drawn from what has worked. It is a legitimate foundation. It is also, in the context of a Generated Future, a structural constraint. An Identity organised around the past will consistently assess what the future requires through the lens of what the past has produced.

Future-based Identity is different. It is an Identity organised around what a declared Commitment requires – not what the accumulated history has produced. The leader operating from future-based Identity does not ask: am I capable of this, given what I have demonstrated before? They ask: who do I need to be, such that this Commitment becomes real?

That shift, from past-based to future-based Identity, is not an act of will. It is a consequence of Commitment sustained under pressure. Each time a Commitment holds through the conditions most likely to justify abandoning it, the Identity reorganises slightly around the declared future rather than the accumulated past. Over time, and it does take time, which is why the Polman case study spans a decade, the Identity that was once organised around what has worked becomes an Identity organised around what has been declared.

That is re-authoring leadership in its most precise form. Not the examination and revision of the past story, but the declaration of a future powerful enough that the past story has to reorganise around it. The authoring is of the Commitment. The re-authoring of Identity is what follows.

The Commitment Declaration

Chapter 4 introduced the Identity Declaration as a precision tool for naming the Being a specific situation requires and stress-testing it against the conditions most likely to trigger reversion. The Commitment Declaration operates at a higher level – not for a single meeting or conversation, but for the future a leader is willing to stand for.

It takes the following form:

I am committed to [Generated Future], such that [what this closes], [what trade-off this makes explicit], and [what I am willing to risk in its service] – even when [the circumstance most likely to produce conditional retreat].

The structure is deliberate. The Generated Future is named first, not as a goal or an aspiration, but as a stand. What the Commitment closes is named second because a Commitment that closes nothing is not yet a Commitment. The explicit trade-off is named third because Commitment without sacrifice is preference. The risk is named fourth because Commitment without personal exposure is delegation. The stress-test arrives last – the specific circumstance most likely to produce the qualified, survivable, conditional version of what was declared.

A complete Declaration might read: I am committed to an organisation whose leadership operates from genuine accountability rather than managed appearances, such that comfortable ambiguity is no longer available, performance conversations happen when they are needed rather than when they feel safe, and I am willing to lose relationships that require me to pretend otherwise – even when the pressure to maintain cohesion at the cost of honesty becomes, as it will, acute.

That is not a comfortable document to write. It is not supposed to be. The discomfort of completing it honestly is the signal that the Commitment is real rather than rhetorical.

The Operating Primer Connection

In the Operating Primer, Commitment sits at the highest causal level. Commitment reorganises Identity. Identity stabilises or destabilises Context. Context makes certain Actions seem obvious and others unthinkable. Actions produce Results and Culture.

When Commitment changes, the entire stack reconfigures. Not immediately, not without resistance, and not without the sustained pressure that genuine Commitment requires to hold. However, when it does reconfigure, it does so structurally, which means the Results that follow are not produced by greater effort inside the same frame. They are produced by a genuinely different frame, organised around a different future.

This is the intervention the Operating Primer is built around. Not the adjustment of Actions, though that matters. Not the examination of Context, though that is necessary. Not even the examination of Identity, though that is the work of this book. The upstream intervention, the one that reorganises everything else, is a Commitment that the existing system cannot simply absorb and survive intact.

Drift is interrupted by Commitment. Not by awareness of Drift, not by a plan to address it, not by a cultural initiative designed to reduce it. By a Commitment that makes the Predictable Future structurally untenable.

The Predictable Future ends when a Commitment is declared that cannot be sustained while producing it.

Write Your Own Chapter

- Name the future you say you are committed to. Now apply the honest test: what has that Commitment closed? What options are no longer available to you because of it? If the answer is nothing, what you have named is a preference.
- What are your Competing Commitments? What are you currently committed to preserving that is structurally incompatible with the future you have declared? Name them without qualification.
- Where in your leadership has Integrity Leakage occurred? Where has a Commitment eroded through accumulated accommodation, and has that erosion been acknowledged, or is the language of Commitment still present while the structural force has dissipated?
- Write a complete Commitment Declaration for the Generated Future you are standing for. Include what it closes, the trade-off it makes explicit, the risk you are willing to carry, and the circumstance most likely to produce conditional retreat.
- Is your Identity organised around the past you have produced or the future you have declared? What would shift if that organising principle changed?

Chapter 6

Courage – The Structural Requirement

If your Commitment feels comfortable, it has not yet met the conditions that will test it.

Chapter 5 established what Commitment is and what it does. A Commitment that is genuine closes options, forces trade-offs, destabilises Identity, and makes the Predictable Future structurally untenable. It reorganises the system around a declared future rather than an inherited one.

What Chapter 5 did not fully address is what happens next. Because the moment a genuine Commitment is made, the moment something is declared that the existing Identity cannot simply absorb, the conditions most likely to collapse it arrive. Almost immediately.

The institutional pressure to qualify. The relationship that requires the Commitment to soften. The legitimate uncertainty that makes waiting seem responsible. The Board question that treats conditional retreat as prudence. The team member whose anxiety is most easily managed by restoring the optionality the Commitment just closed.

None of these are malicious. All of them are coherent responses to what a genuine Commitment produces: structural tension. And structural tension, in the absence of one thing, resolves itself in the direction of least resistance. That one thing is courage.

Courage is not a virtue this chapter is recommending because it is admirable. It is a structural requirement – the force that holds Commitment in place under the conditions most reliably designed to collapse it. Without courage, Commitment contracts. With enough pressure, it contracts to something the existing Identity can survive. Which is, in structural terms, the Predictable Future wearing the language of the Generated one.

This is the chapter's central claim:

Courage is not the bridge between insight and Action, as it is commonly framed in leadership literature. Courage is the structural requirement for Commitment to remain operative when the cost of honouring it becomes concrete and personal.

What Courage Actually Is – and What It Is Not

Most leadership treatments of courage focus on the absence of fear, the management of fear, or the willingness to act despite fear. All of those are partially right and insufficiently precise.

Fear is real and relevant. However, at the executive and Board level, the mechanism that most reliably collapses Commitment under pressure is not fear in its raw emotional form. It is Identity protection – sophisticated, well-defended, and fluent in the language of prudence and wisdom. The leader who retreats from a Commitment because the Board pushes back is not usually experiencing fear as a visceral sensation. They are experiencing the structural pull of an Identity that requires being seen as reasonable, credible, and responsive to legitimate challenge.

That pull is more powerful than fear. It is more durable than fear. It has been practised longer, reinforced more consistently, and defended more successfully than any simple emotional response. Chapter 3 established that Identity is a warehouse of undeclared Commitments. What surfaces under pressure is precisely those Competing Commitments – the ones organised around not losing credibility, not being exposed as wrong, not damaging the relationships that the current Identity depends on.

Courage, in this context, is not the absence of that pull. It is the capacity to act from the declared Commitment rather than from the Identity that the pressure is activating. It is the structural ability to maintain the distinction between who the declared future requires the leader to be, and who the pressure is insisting they remain.

That is a more demanding definition than most leadership treatments offer. It is also more accurate, and more useful, because it points to where the development work actually lives.

Courage Before Competence

There is a principle embedded in the Courage Competence Curve that deserves to be stated explicitly before the model itself is introduced.

Leaders reliably wait for competence before they act with courage. They prepare until they feel ready, build capability until they feel qualified, gather evidence until they feel justified, and seek alignment until they feel supported. Each of those moves is individually reasonable. Collectively, they are a sophisticated mechanism for preserving the Commitment-free zone of the Predictable Future indefinitely.

Generated Futures do not begin with competence. They begin with a declaration made before the evidence is available, before the capability is proven, and before the conditions are certain. The competence follows the Commitment. It does not precede it.

Paul Polman did not eliminate quarterly earnings guidance because Unilever had proven it could sustain investor confidence without it. He eliminated it to create the conditions under which Unilever would have to develop that capability. Wangari Maathai did not wait until she had the political competence to challenge the Moi government before planting trees in rural Kenya. She planted the trees. The political confrontation followed, because a Commitment of that kind, in that Context, made it inevitable.

This sequence – courage first, competence following – is one of the most consistently misunderstood dynamics in leadership development. Most programmes are designed to build competence as a precondition for courage. The evidence of leaders who have generated genuinely new futures suggests the sequence is reversed. Courage is the precondition, while competence is the consequence.

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

Metaphor: The First Step Off the Cliff

There is a specific quality of courage that Generated Futures require that is different from the courage of facing a known danger. It is the courage of the first step into genuinely uncharted terrain – where there is no map, no evidence of what lies below, and no guarantee of outcome.

Most leadership metaphors for courage involve navigating a known danger with determination – the tunnel with the torch, the mountain with the path. Those metaphors are useful for a certain kind of courage. The courage Chapter 5's Commitment requires is something different. It is the courage of declaring a destination before the route exists, of committing to a future whose shape cannot yet be seen from the present position.

The first step off the cliff is not recklessness. It is the recognition that the route down will only become visible once the commitment to the descent has been made. Waiting at the top for the path to appear is the sophisticated version of never descending at all.

Case Study: Wangari Maathai (Kenya)

Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, did not begin with a political movement. She began with a practical observation: that the deforestation of Kenya's land was destroying the livelihoods and dignity of rural women, and that the remedy, planting trees, was something those women could do themselves, without waiting for government permission or institutional support.

The Green Belt Movement she founded in 1977 was not, at its origin, a challenge to the Moi government. It was a Commitment to a specific future: land restored, women empowered, dignity recovered. The courage that initial Commitment required was not political courage. It was the courage of declaring a Generated Future – a Kenya with restored land and women who understood themselves as agents of that restoration – before any evidence existed that such a future was achievable.

The political confrontation arrived because genuine Commitments, held in genuine contexts, eventually make confrontation structurally inevitable. A movement that was reorganising rural women's sense of their own agency, their relationship to their land, and their willingness to act without government sanction was incompatible with an authoritarian government's Identity. The Moi government did not attack the Green Belt Movement because it was politically threatening at its origin. It attacked it because the Commitment behind it, sustained and spreading, was producing a future the existing system could not absorb.

Maathai endured harassment, arrest, and sustained institutional pressure. The Commitment held through all of it. Not because she was constitutionally fearless, her own accounts make clear she experienced genuine fear across many of those years. The Commitment held because it was organised around a future, not around an outcome. The distinction matters. A Commitment organised around an outcome – winning, succeeding, achieving a specific result – can be collapsed by evidence that the outcome is not forthcoming. A Commitment organised around a future – the land restored, the women empowered, the dignity recovered – survives evidence of difficulty because the future is not contingent on any single outcome.

This is the deepest form of courage available to a leader: not the courage to face a specific danger, but the courage to remain committed to a declared future across the full range of conditions that will arrive to test whether the Commitment is genuine.

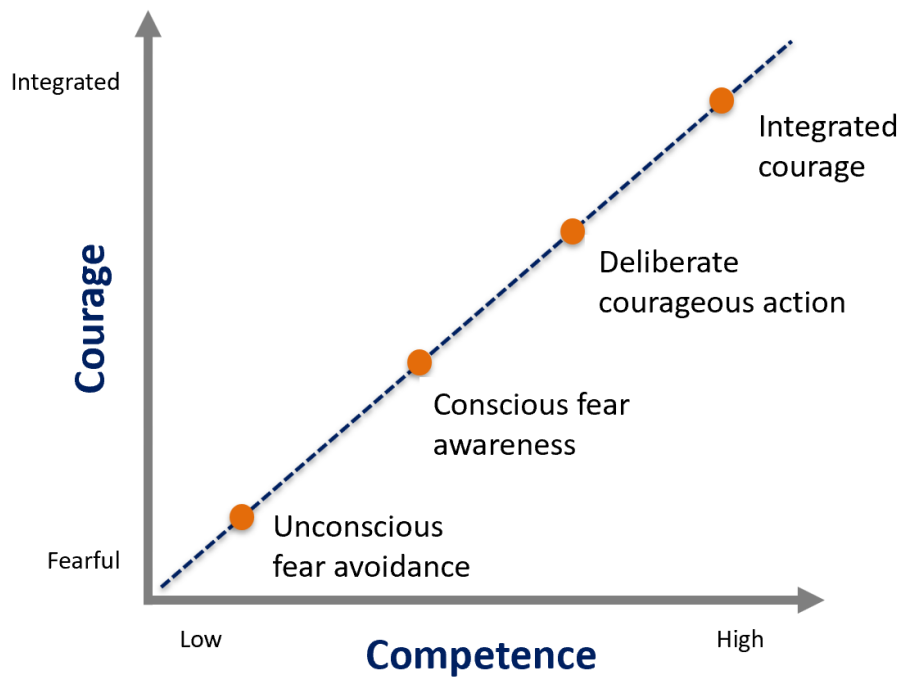
Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, twenty-seven years after planting the first trees. The Generated Future she had declared in 1977 was not produced by a single courageous act. It was produced by the accumulation of courageous acts, each one required by the Commitment, each one strengthening the capacity for the next.

That is the Courage Competence Curve in lived practice.

Model: The Courage Competence Curve

The Courage Competence Curve maps how courage develops as a leadership capability – not as a personality trait that leaders either have or lack, but as a structural capacity that is built through deliberate practice in conditions of genuine pressure.

The curve has four stages.



At Unconscious Fear Avoidance, leaders avoid the Actions that Commitment requires without fully recognising that avoidance is occurring. The avoidance is fluent in the language of reason: it is not the right time, we need more data, the relationship is too important to risk right now, the Board is not ready. Each of those statements is plausible. Collectively, they are Identity protection operating through the mechanism of rational justification. The leader is not aware of being afraid. They are aware of having good reasons for not acting.

At Conscious Fear Awareness, the avoidance becomes visible as avoidance. The leader can name what they are doing, and more precisely, can name what they are protecting. The shift from I am afraid to I notice that I am avoiding, and I can name what my Identity is protecting here is the critical transition. It does not yet produce different Action. It produces the space in which different Action becomes possible. That space is where the Identity Declaration from Chapter 4 and the Commitment Declaration from Chapter 5 do their most important work because they give the leader a declared reference point to act from rather than an avoidance pattern to react from.

At Deliberate Courageous Action, the leader acts from the Commitment rather than from the Identity protection. The Action often feels clumsy, over-prepared, or insufficiently confident. That is structurally inevitable. Courage before competence does not produce polished performance. It produces the first iteration of a genuinely different Being – imperfect, exposed, and organisationally more significant than any amount of polished performance inside the old frame.

At Integrated Courage, the capacity to act from Commitment under pressure has been sufficiently practised that it no longer requires the same deliberate effort. Fear remains present as this is not the elimination of fear but the structural integration of courage alongside it. The leader still notices the pull of Identity protection. They have simply developed, through repetition, the capacity to act from the Commitment rather than from the pull.

The curve is not a linear progression. Leaders move through these stages differently in different contexts, with different Commitments, under different pressures. A leader who has reached Integrated Courage in one domain – financial decisions, strategic direction – may be at Unconscious Fear Avoidance in another – direct relational confrontation, acknowledging uncertainty publicly. The curve maps developmental capacity, not fixed character. Which means it can be worked deliberately.

Context Leakage: When the Organisation Performs Courage Without Practising It

There is a pattern that appears regularly in organisations that have made genuine Commitments at the leadership level, and it deserves to be named explicitly here.

The declaration is made, and the language changes. Strategy documents reflect the new direction, while leadership principles are updated. The organisation begins to use the vocabulary of the Generated Future – transformation, courage, accountability, possibility. The artefacts of the Commitment are visible and convincing.

The operating rhythms do not change. Decisions are still escalated through the same channels. Risk is still managed with the same appetite. Performance conversations are still conducted with the same degree of comfortable ambiguity. The behaviours that would most directly express the declared Commitment – the ones that would require genuine courage under genuine pressure – remain largely as they were.

This is Context leakage: the inherited Context reasserting itself through the operating environment while the declared Context is expressed through language and artefact. It is not hypocrisy in the conventional sense. It is not even deliberate. It is the natural consequence of Identity protection operating through the structures, rhythms, and conversational norms that were designed, consciously or not, to preserve the Predictable Future.

Context leakage is visible in specific signals. The meeting where the declared Commitment to accountability is present in the agenda but absent in the conversation. The performance review

where the language of high standards is used but the difficult feedback is softened past the point of usefulness. The Board discussion where transformation is the stated direction but every decision is evaluated against the criterion of minimal disruption to the existing operating model.

Organisations always reveal their real Context through what they tolerate.

Not through what they declare, not through what they measure, not through what their strategy documents describe – through what is repeatedly allowed to pass without confrontation. Tolerance is one of the most accurate expressions of operative Commitment available to an observer. What leaders tolerate is what they are, in structural terms, committed to.

The intervention for Context leakage is not more communication of the declared Commitment. It is courageous Action in the moments where the inherited Context is most assertively reasserting itself. When the meeting produces comfortable ambiguity where the Commitment requires clarity, the courageous act is to name what has happened and hold the standard. When the performance conversation softens past usefulness, the courageous act is to return to what the Commitment requires rather than to what the relationship can comfortably sustain. When the Board discussion evaluates transformation against the criterion of minimal disruption, the courageous act is to name the evaluative criterion as the problem.

None of those Actions are comfortable. All of them are structurally necessary if the declared Commitment is to remain operative rather than leaking through the cracks of the inherited Context.

I encountered the most instructive version of this pattern in my own leadership at a moment that, on the surface, looked nothing like a leadership failure.

In November 2016, Z Energy won the Deloitte Top 200 Company of the Year. On the same night, I was named CEO of the Year. By any measure, these were the right outcomes for the right reasons. The organisation had performed distinctively, both in the numbers and reputation, since the IPO in 2013. The Caltex acquisition had been completed in June of that year, and its synergies on track to be delivered ahead of schedule. The recognition was legitimate.

I walked into the office the following morning and quoted Robin Sharma to the entire company through an email: *Your business is most vulnerable when it is most successful. Success actually breeds complacency, inefficiency, and – worst of all – arrogance.* Following Sharma's quote I added, last night awards confirm that we are at our most successful point in our six-year history.

I did not plan to say it prior to the awards ceremony. Something was occurring to me about the organisation's situation that I had not yet fully articulated. I felt sense that the celebration, if left unexamined, would produce exactly the conditions Sharma described. The quote arrived intuitively, from that occurring, before I had consciously constructed the argument behind it.

Within two years, despite everything the awards had legitimately recognised, we were in the Drift.

Not dramatically, and not really visibly to the outside. The kind of Drift that Chapter 1 described as the most dangerous precisely because it coexists with apparent momentum. Small erosions in standards. Leadership behaviours that had once been challenged now passing without confrontation. The gap between the stated culture and the pressure culture quietly widening. And, critically, a set of external factors that were both genuinely real and conveniently available as the explanation: the Commerce Commission market study, the complexity of operating at the new scale the Caltex acquisition had created, the friction of integrating two organisations with different Identities.

Every one of those external factors was accurate. None of them was the primary cause.

The primary cause was internal, and I had felt it arriving the morning after the awards. The organisation's Identity had begun organising itself around the success – around protecting what had been built, preserving the reputation that had been earned, and managing the complexity of the new scale – rather than around the Generated Future that had produced the success in the first place. The Commitment had not been formally withdrawn. It had leaked, through the accumulation of small accommodations that each had a plausible explanation, until the structural force of it had dissipated.

The courageous act was not the Sharma quote. That was intuition. The courageous act came eighteen months later, when I named the Drift explicitly – referred back to that morning after the awards as the moment I had first sensed the vulnerability – and said directly that the external factors were real but not primary. That the internal erosion was the cause, and that addressing it required confronting what the success had done to our Identity rather than managing what the market had done to our circumstances.

That confrontation required something the desire-to-be-liked Identity was specifically organised to prevent: telling people who had worked extraordinarily hard, who had delivered genuinely impressive Results, and who were navigating genuine external difficulty – that the primary problem was internal. That the standard had eroded. That what we had been tolerating was not the Commerce Commission's doing. It was ours.

The room did not receive that easily. It was not supposed to. A Commitment held through comfortable conditions is not a Commitment. It is an intention that has not yet been tested.

What I understood differently about courage after that experience was this: the hardest version of it is not the courage to confront someone who is failing. It is the courage to confront a narrative that is both true and insufficient – to name the internal cause when the external explanation is real, available, and considerably more comfortable for everyone in the room, including you.

Context leakage does not only occur in organisations that are struggling. It occurs most expensively in organisations that are succeeding, because success provides the most convincing cover for the erosion of the standards that produced it.

Leadership Gravity

There is a concept that emerges from the relationship between courage, Commitment, and Context that is worth naming as a formal construct.

Leadership gravity is the degree to which a leader's presence stabilises Commitment and coherence under pressure. Some leaders, when they enter a room – or a crisis, or a period of sustained difficulty – produce a stabilising effect on the system. Commitments hold more firmly. Interpretations remain more grounded. The range of what occurs as possible expands rather than contracts. Others produce the opposite: fragmentation increases, Commitments erode, the system narrows toward self-protection.

Leadership gravity is not charisma, and it is not authority. It is the consequence of a leader whose Being is coherent with their Commitment – whose language, emotional ground, and physical

presence are all organised around the same declared future – consistently, and especially under the conditions that most reliably test whether the Commitment is real.

Boards understand this concept immediately when it is named, even when they have not previously had language for it. They have experienced leaders with high gravity, in whose presence difficult conversations become possible, strategic clarity emerges, and the organisation's sense of what it can achieve expands. They have also experienced leaders with low gravity, in whose presence ambiguity accumulates, Commitments soften, and the organisation contracts around what feels survivable rather than what has been declared.

Leadership gravity is not fixed. It is developed through the same mechanism the Courage Competence Curve describes: the repeated practice of acting from Commitment under pressure, until the Being that the Commitment requires becomes the Being that pressure reveals.

Wangari Maathai had extraordinary leadership gravity. Not because she was constitutionally fearless or strategically brilliant, but because her presence, across twenty-seven years of sustained pressure, consistently communicated that the Commitment was real, that the future was non-negotiable, and that the conditions being experienced were the price of pursuing it rather than evidence that it should be abandoned.

That is what high leadership gravity produces in the people around a leader: the reinterpretation of difficulty as the cost of genuine Commitment, rather than as evidence that the Commitment was misguided.

The Operating Primer Connection

In the Operating Primer, Commitment sits above Identity, which sits above Context, which sits above Action. Courage is not a layer in the Primer. It is the structural requirement that holds the Commitment layer in place when the layers below it – Identity and Context – push back.

Drift, as established in Chapter 1, is the natural state of any system that has not been intentionally interrupted. Commitment interrupts Drift. Courage is what prevents Commitment from being absorbed back into Drift at the first pressure point.

Without courage, genuine Commitments become aspirational language within weeks of being declared. The Identity that the Commitment was designed to reorganise reasserts itself through every legitimate pressure – the Board question, the institutional investor, the team member whose anxiety requires comfort, the relationship whose preservation requires the Commitment to soften.

Each of those pressures is real. Each of them is also an invitation to allow the Predictable Future to continue while the language of the Generated Future is maintained.

Courage is the refusal of that invitation. Not once, not at the moment of declaration, but repeatedly – in the specific, concrete, relational moments where the cost of honouring the Commitment becomes personal and immediate.

That is courage as a structural requirement. Not a virtue to aspire toward, but a practice to develop through exactly the mechanism the Courage Competence Curve describes, and in exactly the moments that Context leakage most reliably reveals.

Write Your Own Chapter

- Name the Commitment from Chapter 5 that you are standing for. Now name the specific circumstance – the meeting, the relationship, the Board question, the institutional pressure – most likely to produce conditional retreat. What does the courage that Commitment requires look like in that moment, specifically?
- Where in your organisation is Context leakage most visible? What is being tolerated that contradicts the declared Commitment, and what would the courageous act be in that moment?
- Map yourself on the Courage Competence Curve for the Commitment that matters most to you right now. What stage are you at, and what would move you to the next one?
- Where are you currently waiting for competence before acting with courage? What would change if you reversed the sequence?
- What is your leadership gravity under pressure? What do those around you experience when difficulty arrives – stabilisation and expanded possibility, or contraction and self-protection?

Chapter 7

Collective Identity: How Organisations Preserve the Past

The most stable operating system in any organisation is not its technology, its structure, or its strategy. It is the shared story it tells about who it is and what it must remain.

Chapters 1 through 6 have traced a precise sequence at the level of the individual leader. How situations are occurring shapes every Action taken. Who the leader is Being determines what Results become possible. Identity is the accumulated story organising both. Preconditioned behaviours are what Identity produces under pressure. Commitment is the upstream force that reorganises Identity when it is strong enough to trump the existing story. Courage is the structural requirement for that Commitment to hold.

That sequence is accurate. It is also incomplete because everything described at the individual level also operates at the collective level – in leadership teams, in organisations, and in Boards – and the collective version is considerably more stable, more invisible, and more resistant to intervention than any individual could be alone.

A single leader who has examined their Identity, made a genuine Commitment, and developed the courage to hold it under pressure can still find themselves inside an organisational system that absorbs every upstream intervention and reproduces the Predictable Future intact. Not through resistance or sabotage, but through the simple structural weight of collective Identity operating as it was designed to operate: preserving coherence with the past.

This chapter examines how collective Identity forms, how it sustains the Predictable Future at the organisational level, and what it takes to interrupt it. It then addresses the specific and largely unexamined role of Boards in that interruption, because Boards are simultaneously the most powerful lever available for generating a different future and the most consistent source of the Identity protection that prevents one.

How Collective Identity Forms

Collective Identity forms through the same mechanism individual Identity does, scaled across a system.

Organisations learn, through repetition and reinforcement, what kind of organisation succeeds in their environment. They develop shared interpretations of what the market requires, what customers expect, what regulators will accept, and what competitors are doing. Those interpretations harden into assumptions. The assumptions generate patterns of decision-making, prioritisation, and resource allocation that gradually become indistinguishable from common sense. Over time, the organisation is no longer choosing its Identity. It is executing it – efficiently, coherently, and almost entirely without examination.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's foundational work on social constructionism establishes the mechanism precisely: reality, including organisational reality, is not discovered. It is constructed, through shared language, shared rituals, and shared interpretive frameworks that become, through repetition, experienced as the natural order of things. The organisation's Identity is not a description of what it is. It is a construction that the organisation continuously reproduces through its conversations, its decisions, its measurements, and critically, through what it repeatedly tolerates and what it will not.

What this means for the leaders of that organisation is uncomfortable. The collective Identity they have inherited is not neutral background. It is an active force, operating through every meeting, every promotion decision, every strategic choice, and every performance conversation – making certain futures occur as obviously sensible and others as obviously unrealistic. Leaders do not encounter the collective Identity as a constraint. They encounter it as the organisation's accumulated wisdom, its hard-won expertise, its culture. Which is precisely what makes it so difficult to examine.

Organisations Are Perfectly Designed for What They Produce

This is one of the most consistently useful framings available for diagnosing collective Identity, and one of the most uncomfortable for leaders to sit with.

Every organisation is perfectly designed to produce the level of ownership, avoidance, courage, escalation, and accountability it currently experiences.

Not approximately designed. Perfectly. The Results the organisation produces are not in spite of its operating system. They are the expression of it.

This means that an organisation experiencing persistent execution failure is not failing to execute. It is executing the operating system it has, including the parts of that system organised around self-protection, risk avoidance, escalation dependence, and the preservation of the collective Identity that makes those behaviours feel reasonable.

It means that an organisation experiencing persistent cultural difficulty is not failing culturally. It is producing the culture its upstream conditions are designed to generate, through what its leaders tolerate, through how its performance conversations are conducted, through what its reward and recognition systems actually measure, and through the collective story it tells about what kind of organisation it is.

The diagnostic value of this framing is precise. When a leader is confronted with a performance problem, a culture problem, or a strategy execution problem, the question is not what is going wrong. The question is: what is going right – from the perspective of the collective Identity that is organising this system? What is this pattern preserving? What future is it producing, and for whom does that future feel safe?

Those questions locate the upstream cause with considerably more accuracy than any analysis of execution failure.

Metaphor: The Immune System

The biological immune system is one of the most sophisticated defence mechanisms in nature. Its function is to identify what belongs to the organism and what does not, and to neutralise anything that represents a threat to the organism's coherent continued existence. It does this not through conscious decision-making but through structural recognition: this is us, that is not.

Organisational collective Identity operates as an immune system. It continuously identifies what belongs – what kind of decision, what kind of leader, what kind of future is consistent with the

story the organisation tells about itself – and mounts a response to anything that does not fit. That response is rarely visible as resistance. It presents as legitimate organisational process: due diligence, stakeholder consultation, governance requirements, risk management, the need for further evidence. Each of those responses is individually reasonable. Collectively, they are the immune system doing precisely what it was designed to do: neutralising the threat to the existing Identity.

This is why transformation programmes that are designed and led from inside the existing Identity almost always produce the same result: incremental improvement within the existing frame, delivered with the language of transformation. The immune system does not reject the programme. It absorbs it, processes it, and incorporates it in a form that the existing Identity can survive.

The intervention that the immune system cannot absorb is a Commitment that the existing Identity does not recognise as belonging to itself. A declaration that is genuinely new – not an extension of the current story, not an optimised version of the existing direction, but a future that the collective Identity has not yet learned to process as safe. That is what a Generated Future requires. It is also what makes declaring one so organisationally confronting.

Case Study: Václav Havel (Czech Republic)

Václav Havel's path from playwright to president of Czechoslovakia is not, at first reading, an obvious case study for a chapter on collective Identity in organisations. It becomes one when the question is not what he did but how he understood the mechanism he was working with.

Havel's essay *The Power of the Powerless*, written in 1978, is one of the most precise analyses of collective Identity as a self-reproducing system ever written, and it was not written about organisations. It was written about a society in which millions of people participated daily in the reproduction of a system they did not individually endorse, because the social cost of not participating exceeded what any individual was willing to pay.

His central metaphor is the greengrocer who puts a sign in his shop window reading *Workers of the World, Unite!* The greengrocer does not believe the slogan. The authorities do not believe the greengrocer believes it. Everyone in the street reading it knows everyone else knows it is not an expression of genuine Commitment. The sign is displayed anyway because displaying it is the price of coherence with the collective Identity, and the cost of not displaying it is exclusion from the social world in which the greengrocer lives and works.

That dynamic – individuals participating in the reproduction of a collective Identity they do not individually endorse, because the cost of non-participation is too high – is not unique to

authoritarian political systems. It is present in every organisation whose collective Identity has calcified around self-preservation. The leader who does not challenge the strategic assumption everyone privately questions. The executive who does not surface the performance problem the leadership team all knows exists. The Board director who does not name the elephant in the room that everyone has agreed, without discussion, not to name. Each of them is displaying the sign.

Havel's insight was that collective Identity systems of this kind are not disrupted by better argument or more compelling evidence. They are disrupted by individuals who refuse to display the sign – who act, in their own domain, as if the declared future were already real. He called this *living in truth*: not the grand gesture of public resistance, but the consistent, daily practice of acting from a Commitment that the collective Identity cannot accommodate.

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 was not produced by a superior political strategy. It was produced by the accumulated weight of enough individuals living in truth – in enough domains, with enough consistency – that the collective Identity's immune system could no longer process the disruption. The system did not reform. It collapsed. Because the Commitment to a different future had become more structurally operative than the Commitment to the existing Identity.

For leaders in organisations, Havel's mechanism translates directly. Collective Identity is not disrupted by transformation programmes. It is disrupted by leaders who consistently act from the declared Commitment in the specific moments where the collective Identity is most assertively demanding compliance. Not in the strategy offsite, where disruption is structurally safe. In the meeting where the comfortable assumption goes unchallenged. In the performance conversation where the difficult feedback is softened. In the Board discussion where the inconvenient question is not asked. Those are the moments where the sign is either displayed or refused, and where the collective Identity either reproduces itself or begins, gradually, to reorganise.

False Alignment: The Collective Version of Integrity Leakage

Chapter 5 introduced Integrity Leakage as the process by which individual Commitments erode through accumulated accommodation. At the collective level, the equivalent mechanism is False Alignment.

False Alignment occurs when a leadership team produces the appearance of Commitment to a direction without any individual having made a genuine personal stand behind it. The meeting produces consensus, the language reflects the agreed direction, and the strategy document is updated. Everyone leaves the room having agreed, and having agreed to nothing, in any structural

sense, because no one has committed to anything they would not quietly renegotiate if the cost became sufficiently high.

False Alignment is not dishonesty. It is the entirely predictable consequence of a leadership team whose members are each, individually, managing their own Identity protection within the collective social system of the team. Agreeing in the room is the price of belonging to the team. Disagreeing is the cost, to the relationship, to the reputation, to the status within the collective Identity of the leadership group. So the alignment is produced but the Commitment is not.

The signals of False Alignment are specific and recognisable. Decisions that are made in meetings and not acted upon outside them. Language that is ambitious in strategy documents and cautious in operational choices. Agreed directions that are consistently modified at the implementation level by people who agreed to them at the declaration level. Leadership team members who express privately what they will not say publicly. Performance problems that everyone is aware of and no one is confronting.

What False Alignment produces, reliably, is the performance of transformation while the system generating the current Results remains intact. The organisation is not failing to transform. It is performing transformation – producing all of the artefacts and language of a genuine Commitment to change – while the collective Identity quietly continues to organise every consequential decision around the preservation of what already exists.

The intervention for False Alignment is not better facilitation of leadership team conversations, though that helps. It is the same intervention Chapter 6 identified for Context leakage: courageous Action in the specific moments where the collective Identity is most assertively demanding compliance. The leader who names the False Alignment – who says, in the room where it is occurring, that the agreement being produced has no Commitment behind it – is the one who creates the conditions in which genuine Commitment might become possible.

That requires considerably more courage than most leadership teams currently expect of their members. It also produces considerably better Results.

Boards as Identity-Preservation Systems

There is a dimension of collective Identity that deserves explicit and extended treatment, because it is the dimension most consequential for the organisations this book is written for, and the dimension least likely to appear in conventional leadership development material.

Boards are Identity-preservation systems.

That is not a criticism. It is a structural observation about what governance systems are designed to do and what they therefore tend to produce. Boards are constituted to provide oversight, to manage risk, to ensure accountability, and to act as stewards of the organisation's assets and reputation. Those functions, executed well, require a conservative orientation toward the existing Identity: what has this organisation committed to, is it honouring those Commitments, and is it protecting the interests of those to whom it is accountable?

That orientation, which is entirely appropriate for governance, becomes structurally problematic at the precise moment when the organisation needs to generate a future that the existing Identity cannot produce. At that moment, the Board's conservative orientation – its constituted disposition toward the preservation of what the organisation already is – becomes the most powerful force in the system for the reproduction of the Predictable Future.

This dynamic operates through specific mechanisms that are worth naming with precision.

The first is the authorisation threshold. Boards authorise the future they can understand and justify. A Generated Future, by definition, cannot be fully justified by reference to existing evidence because it is a future that requires the organisation to become something it has not yet demonstrated it can be. Boards that apply their existing evaluative criteria to a Generated Future will almost always find it wanting. The evidence is insufficient, the risk is unclear, and the business case is speculative. Every one of those assessments is accurate within the frame of the existing Identity. None of them address whether the existing Identity is capable of producing the future the organisation needs.

The second is the risk appetite asymmetry. Boards experience the downside of bold Commitments much more acutely than the upside of Predictable Futures. The cost of a Generated Future that fails is visible, attributable, and personally consequential for Board members. The cost of a Predictable Future that quietly limits the organisation's trajectory is diffuse, slow, and rarely attributable to any specific governance decision. That asymmetry produces a structural bias toward the Predictable Future that operates regardless of how strategically sophisticated the individual Board members are.

The third is the collective Identity of the Board itself. Boards develop their own Identity – their own accumulated story about what kind of governance is credible, what kind of questions are appropriate, what kind of challenge is legitimate, and what kind of relationship with management is constructive. That Board Identity is rarely examined as a variable in strategic discussions. It is the frame within which strategic discussions take place. Which means that a Board whose collective Identity is organised around conservative governance will systematically evaluate every strategic proposal through the lens of that Identity, including proposals that require a fundamentally different evaluative framework to be assessed accurately.

The synthesis document states this directly: Boards are often invited into the system too late, at the level of Results or execution. The leverage available to Boards lies upstream, at the level of Commitment, Identity, and Context. However, Boards that have not examined their own collective Identity will apply their existing evaluative framework to upstream questions and will thereby reproduce the Predictable Future with governance-level authority.

What Boards Can Do That No One Else Can

Having named the ways in which Boards function as Identity-preservation systems, it is important to be precise about the countervailing truth: Boards are also the only body in an organisation's system with the legitimacy, the authority, and the structural independence to do what Generated Futures require at the governance level.

Only Boards can legitimately authorise a Generated Future that is not justified by past performance. The CEO can declare it, the leadership team can commit to it, and the organisation can begin to organise around it. Without Board authorisation – explicit, unambiguous, and sustained through the pressure that will inevitably arrive – the Generated Future is always vulnerable to being renegotiated at the governance level in the name of prudent stewardship.

Only Boards can protect leadership from premature reversion to predictability. One of the most consistent patterns in organisational transformation is the pressure, arriving from multiple directions simultaneously, to qualify the declaration, to restore optionality, to manage the transformation at a pace the existing Identity can survive. Leadership teams under that pressure need a governance structure that holds the Commitment intact – that says, in effect, the direction is set, the exploration of retreat is not on our agenda. Without that governance structure, the pressure almost always succeeds.

Only Boards can insist on the distinction between declared Commitment and operative Commitment. The Board's position outside the executive system gives it a perspective on False Alignment that internal leaders cannot easily access, because they are inside the social system that False Alignment is produced by. A Board that asks, consistently and specifically, not whether the strategy is being executed but whether the Commitments that strategy depends on are genuinely operative, and that names False Alignment when it observes it, is exercising governance at the level of causality rather than the level of Results.

Only Boards can require Commitment renewal rather than assumption. Commitments erode through Integrity Leakage. The Board's governance cycle – annual reviews, strategy sessions, performance assessments – provides a structural opportunity to test whether operative Commitments are still intact, or whether the language of Commitment has persisted beyond the structural force of it. That distinction, asked for explicitly and answered honestly, is one of the highest-leverage governance interventions available.

The Board questions that exercise this leverage are different from the ones most Boards currently ask. The shift is from: are we executing well, to what future are we actually committed to generating? From: is management aligned, to where are Commitments hedged, eroded, or unrenewed? From: do we have the right culture, to what are we repeatedly producing through our decisions and our tolerances?

Those questions, asked consistently and from genuine Commitment to the answers, are governance at the level of causality. They are also, for most Boards, a materially different practice from the one currently in place.

The Collective Identity Declaration

Just as individual leaders can use the Identity Declaration and the Commitment Declaration to make explicit what they are standing for and stress-test it against the conditions most likely to produce reversion, leadership teams and Boards can apply the same practice at the collective level.

A Collective Identity Declaration for a leadership team might take this form:

As a leadership team, we are committed to [Generated Future], such that [what this closes at the collective level], [what trade-off this makes explicit for the team as a whole], and [what we are collectively willing to risk in its service] – even when [the circumstance most likely to produce collective retreat into False Alignment].

The stress-test clause is the most important element at the collective level. The circumstance most likely to produce collective retreat is almost always one of three things: sustained external pressure that makes the existing Identity feel like a protection rather than a constraint; a performance shortfall that makes the Predictable Future appear more credible than the Generated Future; or a significant internal disagreement that makes False Alignment feel safer than the confrontation that genuine Commitment would require.

Naming those circumstances explicitly, in the Declaration itself, does not prevent them from arriving. It prevents them from operating unconsciously as justifications for renegotiation. A leadership team that has named, in advance, the specific circumstance most likely to produce retreat has already made it harder for that circumstance to produce it, because the retreat, when it arrives, will have to be named as what it is rather than explained as a reasonable response to changed conditions.

The Operating Primer Connection

In the Operating Primer, Context sits above Action and Results. Collective Identity is the primary mechanism through which Context is generated and stabilised at the organisational level. It is the shared interpretive field – produced through language, reinforced through tolerated behaviour, sustained through operating rhythms – that makes certain Actions seem obviously sensible and certain futures seem obviously available or unavailable.

Drift, at the collective level, is the inevitable consequence of collective Identity operating without interruption. The organisation does not choose the Predictable Future. It produces it – consistently, efficiently, and without any individual intending it – because the collective Identity is organised around a story that can only produce what has already been produced.

The interruption of collective Drift requires everything the previous six chapters have established: occurring-design at the level of how the future is presented to the organisation; a collective Being that is coherent with the declared Commitment; an Identity that has been examined and recognised as a construction rather than a fact; preconditioned behaviours named and interrupted at the team level; a Commitment declared with sufficient force to close options and force trade-offs at the collective level; and the courage to act from that Commitment in the specific moments where the collective Identity is most assertively demanding compliance.

All of that is necessary. The additional requirement, at the collective level, is governance. Not governance as oversight and risk management, which is necessary but insufficient. Governance as

the structural protection of a Generated Future against the legitimate, persistent, and entirely predictable pressure of the collective Identity to reproduce the Predictable one.

That is the Board's most distinctive contribution to the generated future. Not the strategy, and not the execution. The structural protection of the Commitment that makes the strategy non-negotiable.

Write Your Own Chapter

- What is the collective Identity your organisation is currently executing? Not the stated values or the strategy narrative, but the actual story the system is telling about what it must remain in order to be credible. How is that story being reproduced, specifically, in this week's decisions and conversations?
- Where in your leadership team is False Alignment most present? What direction has been agreed to in the room that has no genuine Commitment behind it, and what would change if that were named honestly?
- If your organisation is a perfectly designed system for what it currently produces, what is it perfectly designed to produce? Name the Results, the behaviours, and the cultural patterns that the current design is generating with precision and reliability.
- For Board members: which of the three Board mechanisms – authorisation threshold, risk appetite asymmetry, or Board collective Identity – is most active in your governance system right now? What would it take to exercise governance at the level of causality rather than Results?
- Write a Collective Identity Declaration for your leadership team. Complete all clauses, including the stress-test. What did the process of completing it reveal about the difference between your team's declared Commitment and its operative one?

Chapter 8

The Generated Future: Writing What Does Not Yet Exist

Re-authoring leadership does not begin with examining the past. It begins with declaring a future the past cannot justify, and committing to it before you are ready.

This book opened with a provocation: you are not leading from who you are. You are leading from who you learned you had to be. The script running your leadership was not chosen consciously. It accumulated through repetition, reinforcement, and the conclusions drawn from what worked. It has been producing a future that is more predictable than you need it to be, with a precision and reliability that your stated intentions have been unable to interrupt.

Eight chapters have traced the mechanism of that production:

- How situations are occurring to you and to everyone you lead shapes every Action taken.
- Who you are Being in response determines what Results become possible.
- Identity is the accumulated story organising both – a warehouse of undeclared Commitments that make the Predictable Future feel not like a constraint but like reality itself.
- Preconditioned behaviours are what that Identity produces under pressure, efficiently and automatically, in the moments that matter most.
- Commitment is the upstream force that reorganises Identity when it is genuine, when it closes options, forces trade-offs, and makes the existing system structurally untenable.
- Courage is the requirement for Commitment to hold under the conditions most reliably designed to collapse it.
- Collective Identity is the organisational version of everything that operates at the individual level – more stable, more invisible, and more resistant to intervention than any individual leader can be alone.

That is the architecture of the Predictable Future. This chapter addresses the architecture of the Generated Future, and what it structurally requires to move from one to the other.

The Distinction That Resolves Everything

Chapter 1 introduced the Predictable Future and the Generated Future as precise terms. They deserve one final, complete statement before this book closes.

A Predictable Future is the future the system is already designed to produce. It is inferred from the past – from the current configuration of Identity, Context, and Commitment – and it will arrive without requiring any deliberate act. It is not necessarily unwelcome. It may represent genuine improvement on what has gone before. The problem is not that it is bad. The problem is that it is produced by the system as it currently stands, which means that no amount of effort, intention, or strategic ambition applied within that system will generate anything fundamentally different. The Predictable Future is not a destination anyone chose. It is where the current operating system is already pointing, and where it will arrive unless something upstream is interrupted.

A Generated Future is not extrapolated from current conditions. It is not a more ambitious version of the current trajectory. It cannot be justified by the evidence available at the moment of declaration, because it requires the system to become something it has not yet demonstrated it can be. A Generated Future is declared, brought into existence by a Commitment strong enough to reorganise Identity, Context, and Action around what has been stood for. It creates structural tension the moment it is declared. It immediately surfaces Competing Commitments.

It makes the Predictable Future visible as a choice rather than an inevitability. None of those consequences are comfortable. All of them are the signs that the declaration was genuine.

The distinction between the two is the most consequential in leadership. It is also the most consistently avoided, because the Predictable Future wears many convincing disguises. It presents as responsible stewardship, as evidence-based decision-making, as respect for what has been built, as appropriate caution in conditions of genuine uncertainty. Each of those presentations is plausible. None of them are sufficient reason to settle for a future the current system was already going to produce.

What the Move Actually Requires

The Transformation Sequence that underlies this book and the Operating Primer describes the minimum conditions for moving an organisation from a Predictable Future to a Generated Future. It is worth stating precisely, because most organisations attempting transformation begin at step four and wonder why the results are not sustained.

The sequencing moves from non-negotiable declaration through deliberate Identity shift, Context audit, Scaffolding redesign, and Reinforcement

The first requirement is a non-negotiable declaration. Not a goal, not a target, not an aspiration – a declaration of a future that will exist, independent of current circumstances, written as if it has already been achieved and examined from that point looking back. The discipline of this declaration is the refusal to negotiate with the present. The moment the future is adjusted to fit existing constraints, it becomes an extension of the Predictable Future rather than a break from it. A well-declared Generated Future does three things immediately: it creates clarity about what matters, it exposes the gap between current reality and that future, and it establishes a standard against which leadership will be judged. The question it requires leaders to answer honestly is not whether the future is achievable. It is whether they are willing to be known for it, even when delivery is uncertain.

The second requirement is a deliberate Identity shift. An organisation does not deliver a future. People do. People act in ways consistent with who they believe they are. If the declared future requires different Actions, it necessarily requires a different Identity. The question is not what needs to be done differently. It is who the organisation needs to be for this future to become real. That Identity must be defined explicitly, in terms of how decisions are made, how Commitments are honoured, how performance gaps are addressed, how conflict is held, and what is tolerated and what is not. Identity is made visible through language, behaviour, and standards. It is reinforced in moments of pressure, not in moments of comfort. Without this step, the organisation will interpret the new future through its old Identity and reduce it to something familiar. The Predictable Future will be produced while the language of the Generated one is maintained.

The third requirement is a Context audit for structural contradiction. Context determines how situations are occurring to people. It shapes what they see, what they prioritise, and what they believe is possible. If Context remains unchanged, behaviour will remain consistent with that Context regardless of stated intentions. The audit examines where the declared future and the required Identity are not supported by the existing operating environment – where a future requiring accountability is embedded in a Context that tolerates missed Commitments, where a future requiring courage is embedded in a Context that punishes exposure, where a future requiring collaboration is embedded in a Context that rewards individual performance. These are not minor misalignments. They are systemic barriers that make it entirely rational for people to

behave in ways that undermine the Generated Future. Structural contradiction, left unaddressed, guarantees that Context leakage will absorb every upstream intervention.

The fourth requirement is scaffolding redesign. People respond rationally to the systems they operate within. If the system rewards one set of behaviours while leadership calls for another, the system will prevail. Redesigning the scaffolding – incentives, governance, measurement, operating rhythms, decision rights, meeting design – ensures that the organisation is structurally aligned to the declared future and required Identity. The intent is not to redesign everything. It is to identify and shift the few critical levers that will materially change what occurs as rational in this system. This is where leadership intent becomes operational reality. It is also where most transformation efforts stop, because the scaffolding redesign is visible, deliverable, and measurable in ways that the upstream work is not. Stopping here, however, is the error of beginning at step four.

The fifth requirement is public and consistent reinforcement. Transformation is sustained through what leaders do when no one is designing the programme – in ordinary conversations, in the tolerance or non-tolerance of specific behaviours, in the standards maintained under pressure. Behaviour that is acknowledged and modelled becomes normalised. Behaviour that is ignored or tolerated persists. Occasional reinforcement creates noise. Inconsistent reinforcement creates confusion. Both undermine the shift and reintroduce the old Context. The discipline is sustaining reinforcement beyond the point where it feels necessary. That is typically precisely the point at which it matters most.

Case Study: Sir Edmund Hillary (Aotearoa New Zealand)

Sir Edmund Hillary is remembered, almost universally, for the summit of Everest. The ascent on 29 May 1953, the first confirmed human arrival at the highest point on earth, is one of the defining achievements of the twentieth century, and Hillary's understated response upon returning – *“well, we knocked the bastard off”* – has become one of its most quoted sentences.

What is less universally understood is that the summit was not Hillary's Generated Future. It was the evidence that the Generated Future was possible. The future he declared, and lived into for the remaining fifty-five years of his life, was something the summit made available but did not itself constitute.

The Himalayan Trust, which Hillary founded in 1960, seven years after the ascent, was a Commitment to the Sherpa people of Nepal whose support, knowledge, and courage had made the climb possible in the first place. It built schools, hospitals, bridges, and airstrips across the

Himalayan region – not as a philanthropic gesture made from a position of celebrity, but as an expression of an Identity that the Commitment to Everest had reorganised. Hillary had gone to the mountain as a beekeeper from Auckland with exceptional physical courage and determination. He came down from it with an Identity organised around a different future: a future in which the people who had made the achievement possible shared in its consequences.

That reorganisation was not immediate and not simple. It required sustained Commitment across decades, through the death of his wife and daughter in a plane crash at Kathmandu airport in 1975 – one of the most acute tests of whether a Commitment to a Generated Future survives the conditions that most reliably justify abandoning it. It held, and the Trust continued. The Identity organised around the future of the Sherpa people persisted through loss of a kind that would have produced reversion in most.

Hillary's case illustrates the full sequence this book has traced. The courage came before the competence. The Commitment preceded the evidence. The Identity that the summit produced was not the Identity that had arrived at base camp. The Generated Future, a Himalayan region with schools, medical care, and infrastructure, was not justified by anything available at the moment of its declaration. It was declared, and then systematically produced, across more than four decades of sustained Commitment.

He did not re-author his Identity by examining the past. He declared a future, and the Identity followed.

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, the accumulated experience, the Identity that formed through everything that worked and everything that did not. The pen represents agency – the capacity to decide how the next path will be drawn.

Most leaders focus on the map. They carry the accumulated authority of what they have built, the hard-won expertise of what they have learned, the social capital of the Identity they have established. That map is real and it is valuable. The problem is not that leaders carry it. The problem is that too many treat it as determinative, as a prediction of where the next path will go, rather than as a record of where the previous one has been.

The pen is what this book has been about. Not the pen as a metaphor for storytelling or narrative revision, in the conventional leadership-as-narrative sense. The pen as the capacity to declare a

future that the map does not yet show – to commit to a destination before the route exists, to author an Identity that the accumulated history has not yet produced.

The map does not tell you where to go. It tells you where you have been. The pen is for everything else.

I know this sequence from the inside.

When I left BP in 2009 after twenty-five years, I did not leave with a clear next role. I took a deliberate sabbatical – time I used not to rest, but to reflect on everything I had learned across four continents, fifteen roles, and one of the world's largest energy companies. The good and the bad. What extraordinary performance actually required, and what consistently prevented it. What I had seen work and what I had watched fail, including in myself.

Out of that reflection came a point of view I had not previously been able to articulate with precision: what a world-class company could actually look like, and in the context of my new role as Z, a world-class Kiwi company. Not a subsidiary of a global major, and not a rebranded version of what had existed before. Something genuinely new – built on New Zealand Identity, committed to a broader definition of what an energy company could stand for, and capable of generating extraordinary performance precisely because it was not constrained by the inherited logic of its global predecessors.

That point of view became the declaration I took into Z Energy on day one as Chief Executive in 2010. What I was declaring was not modest and I put it in front of everyone at my first townhall on day one.

My research had pointed to six elements present in all world-class companies at that time: superior returns, a competitively advantaged business, thought leadership in the industry, options for a future beyond the core business, an iconic brand that transcended the sector, and – the one that mattered most to me – a place where the energy people expended in their work was experienced as personal growth rather than just “work”. Six elements. All of them declared before the evidence existed that Z could deliver any of them. Before a brand existed, before a single customer had chosen Z over anyone else, and before the organisation had demonstrated it could operate independently of the Shell infrastructure it had just separated from.

I clearly recall saying, “I am committed to is being a world-class Kiwi company. I have no idea of how to really do that, and I want to work with you on figuring that out together”.

The resistance arrived immediately and in a form I had anticipated but still had to navigate carefully. To the people who had built their careers inside Shell's New Zealand business, I was not the incoming Chief Executive of their company. I was the guy from BP – the new brand, the new Identity, the future they had not chosen – even though I first left BP in New Zealand to work with them globally 17 years before I joined this Shell team. What was going through their minds was not hard to read: he will turn us into BP. Meaning: he will erase what we have built and replace it with something that serves his declared future rather than honouring our history.

After that first wave, the resistance took a more sophisticated form. Everything I was doing – the investment in leadership development, the focus on culture, the commitment to a distinctive brand Identity rather than a commodity fuel retailer – was rationalised as simply replicating BP. I was not building a world-class Kiwi company, the implicit argument ran. I was building a smaller, southern hemisphere version of the global major I had just left.

That rationalisation was the organisational immune system doing precisely what Chapter 7 described. It was not hostile. It was coherent from inside the existing Identity. It required something I had not fully understood at the moment of the original declaration: that holding a Generated Future against that kind of resistance was not a strategic challenge. It was an Identity challenge. The resistance was not asking me to reconsider the direction. It was asking me to reconsider who I was willing to be in service of it.

What the declaration required me to become was a leader who could hold the Z Identity steady – the world-class Kiwi company Identity, not the BP Identity, not the Shell Identity – in the face of every coherent argument that the familiar version of things was more credible, more provable, and more obviously safe.

That becoming did not happen at the moment of declaration. It happened across many years, in hundreds of moments where the existing Identity of the organisation, or my own desire to be liked, or the budget cycle, or the takeover response, presented a legitimate reason to soften the stand.

Each time the Commitment held, the Identity reorganised slightly. Each time it was tested and survived, the Generated Future became slightly more real and slightly less theoretical.

That is the sequence the book has been tracing. The declaration came first, before readiness, before certainty, before the Identity had reorganised to accommodate it. The reorganisation followed. Gradually, through pressure, and not without cost.

The pen was in my hands on day one. What I did not yet know was how long it would take to write what I had declared, and what it would require me to become in order to finish the chapter I had started.

Future-Based Identity: The Destination

Chapter 5 introduced future-based Identity as the destination of sustained Commitment. It deserves its final articulation here.

Most leaders derive their Identity from the past. From their history, their accumulated capability, their achievements, their expertise, their legacy. That derivation is natural and legitimate. It is also, at the level of leadership this book is addressed to, a structural constraint. An Identity organised around what has been produced will consistently assess what the future requires through the lens of what the past has demonstrated. It will find Generated Futures ambitious but unrealistic, inspiring but imprudent, worth aspiring to but not worth risking the existing Identity for.

Future-based Identity is an Identity organised around what a declared Commitment requires, not what the accumulated history has produced. The leader operating from future-based Identity does not ask: am I capable of this, given what I have demonstrated before? They ask: who do I need to be, such that this Commitment becomes real? They do not assess the Generated Future against the existing Identity. They allow the Generated Future to reorganise the Identity, and they develop the courage to sustain that reorganisation through the pressure that will arrive to test whether it is genuine.

That shift, from past-based to future-based Identity, is not an act of will. It cannot be decided once in a quiet moment of reflection and then held indefinitely through determination. It is a consequence of Commitment sustained under pressure. Each time a Commitment holds through the conditions most likely to justify abandoning it, the Identity reorganises slightly around the declared future. Each time the Identity Declaration is completed honestly – all three clauses, without abbreviation – and acted upon in the specific moment it was designed for, the capacity for future-based Identity grows. Each time Context leakage is named and interrupted rather than tolerated, the collective Identity moves slightly in the direction of the Generated Future.

None of those are large movements in isolation. Accumulated over time, sustained through pressure, reinforced through the public and consistent behaviour of leaders who are genuinely organised around the declared future – they are how extraordinary Results are produced. Not through superior strategy, not through exceptional talent, not through the right structure or the right market conditions. Through the structural reorganisation of the upstream conditions from which every Action, and every Result, flows.

The Two Questions That Determine Everything

The Transformation Sequence closes with a tension that is worth stating directly as this book closes.

The first question:

Are you willing to change what your organisation is committed to, who it is being, and how it operates – or are you looking to improve what already exists?

That question distinguishes genuine transformation from sophisticated management of the Predictable Future. Both are legitimate activities. They are not the same activity. Most organisations believing they are doing the first are doing the second – because the upstream conditions have not been interrupted, the Identity has not been reorganised, and the Commitment has not been made with sufficient force to close the routes back to the Predictable Future.

The second question:

Are you willing to lose the organisation you know – and the Identity you built within it – to create the organisation the future requires?

That question is the hardest in this book. It is harder than any of the frameworks, any of the case studies, any of the models. Because it is not asking about strategy or capability or courage in the abstract. It is asking about something personal: the Identity that was built, legitimately and with real effort, through everything that worked. The reputation that was earned. The organisation that was shaped. The story that was told about what kind of leader this is and what kind of organisation this is.

Re-authoring that Identity is not a narrative exercise. It is a structural act – the declaration of a Commitment strong enough that the existing story has to reorganise around it. It requires examining what is being protected, naming the Competing Commitments, stress-testing the Declaration against the conditions most likely to produce conditional retreat, and then holding the Commitment through exactly those conditions when they arrive, as they will.

That is the work. Not the insight that the script is running. Not the reflection that a different future might be possible. The declaration of that future, before the evidence exists, and the sustained Commitment to it through the full range of conditions that will arrive to test whether it is real.

The Operating Primer as an Integrated System

This book has addressed the Identity layer of the Operating Primer – the most personal, most intimate, and most resistant layer of the system that generates organisational Results.

The other books in this series address the layers above and around it. *The Commitment Advantage* examines Commitment in the depth this book has pointed toward but not fully explored – the full architecture of how Commitments are made, sustained, eroded, and renewed. *What Water?* examines Context – the invisible environment of interpretation within which Identity stabilises and Commitment strengthens or erodes. *Above the Ceiling* examines what happens when Identity and Commitment misalign, which is most of the time, for most leaders, and what it structurally takes to close that gap.

Together, the four books address the full upstream architecture of the Operating Primer. Each can be read independently, as an entry point to the system. Each is deepened by the others. The architecture is the same whether you enter through Identity, Commitment, Context, or the ceiling between them. The upstream conditions generate the downstream Results. The only question is whether those upstream conditions are being examined – or whether the Predictable Future is

simply being produced, efficiently and coherently, by a system that has never been required to account for itself.

That accounting is what this book has been asking for. It is not comfortable work. It is not finished in a single reading or a single coaching engagement or a single leadership offsite. It is the ongoing discipline of examining the script, naming the Competing Commitments, stress-testing the Declarations, holding the Commitment under pressure, and returning – each time the Identity contracts around the familiar – to the question that organises everything this book has been building toward.

Who do I need to be, such that the future I have declared becomes real?

Write Your Own Chapter

- State the Generated Future you are standing for. Not the aspiration, the declaration. Write it in the present tense, at a future point, looking back. What has been achieved? What has the organisation become? What did it cost to get there, and was the Commitment worth it?
- Apply the five-step Transformation Sequence to your organisation or your leadership context. At which step is the work genuinely happening, and at which step is it being performed rather than practised?
- Answer the two closing questions directly, without qualification. Are you willing to change what you are committed to, who you are being, and how you operate, or are you improving what already exists? Are you willing to lose the organisation you know, and the Identity you built within it, to create the organisation the future requires?
- What is the single Commitment, made genuinely and without the survivable alternative, that would most reorganise your Identity around the Generated Future you have declared?
- Six months from now, what will be different, not because you understood this book, but because you acted from it?

Epilogue

Leadership is never finished. The only question is whether it is organised around the past you have produced or the future you have declared.

The chapters of this book have asked more of you than most leadership development material does.

Not more effort, not more hours, not more rigorous execution of a development plan. More honesty. More precision. More willingness to examine the upstream conditions that are generating your Results, and to acknowledge, without the comfort of narrative, that those conditions are producing exactly the future they were designed to produce.

That examination is not a one-time event. It is a practice. The script reasserts. Pressure activates Identity protection. Competing Commitments resurface in the language of wisdom and prudence. The Predictable Future continues to present itself as the responsible choice. These are not failures of character or discipline. They are structural consequences of the system continuing to do what systems do – reproduce themselves, preserve coherence, resist the structural tension that genuine Commitment introduces.

The practice of re-authoring leadership is the ongoing refusal to allow that reproduction to proceed unexamined.

It requires, repeatedly: noticing how the situation is occurring and choosing not to treat the occurring as fact; naming who you are Being and asking whether that Being is organised around the past or the future; examining the Identity that is organising your occurring and your Being and asking what it is protecting. It requires interrupting the preconditioned behaviour before it runs the leader, holding the Commitment through the conditions that most reliably justify abandoning it, sustaining the courage the Commitment requires in the specific moments, conversations, and decisions where the cost of honouring it becomes concrete and personal, and designing the collective environment – the Context, the scaffolding, the operating rhythms – so that the Generated Future has structural support rather than structural opposition.

None of that is the work of a chapter. It is the work of a leadership lifetime.

The leaders in this book – Mandela, Dame Whina Cooper, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Wangari Maathai, Paul Polman, Satya Nadella, Václav Havel, Sir Edmund Hillary – did not produce extraordinary futures through superior strategy or exceptional circumstances.

They produced them through the sustained refusal to allow the Predictable Future to be mistaken for the only available one. They declared futures the past could not justify, built Identities around those futures rather than around what had already been established, held Commitments through conditions that would have justified retreat, and designed environments in which others could do the same.

That is the work this book has been pointing toward. Not a better version of the leader you already are. A declaration of the leader the future requires, and the Commitment to become that leader before the evidence exists that it is possible.

The script is already running.

The pen is in your hands.

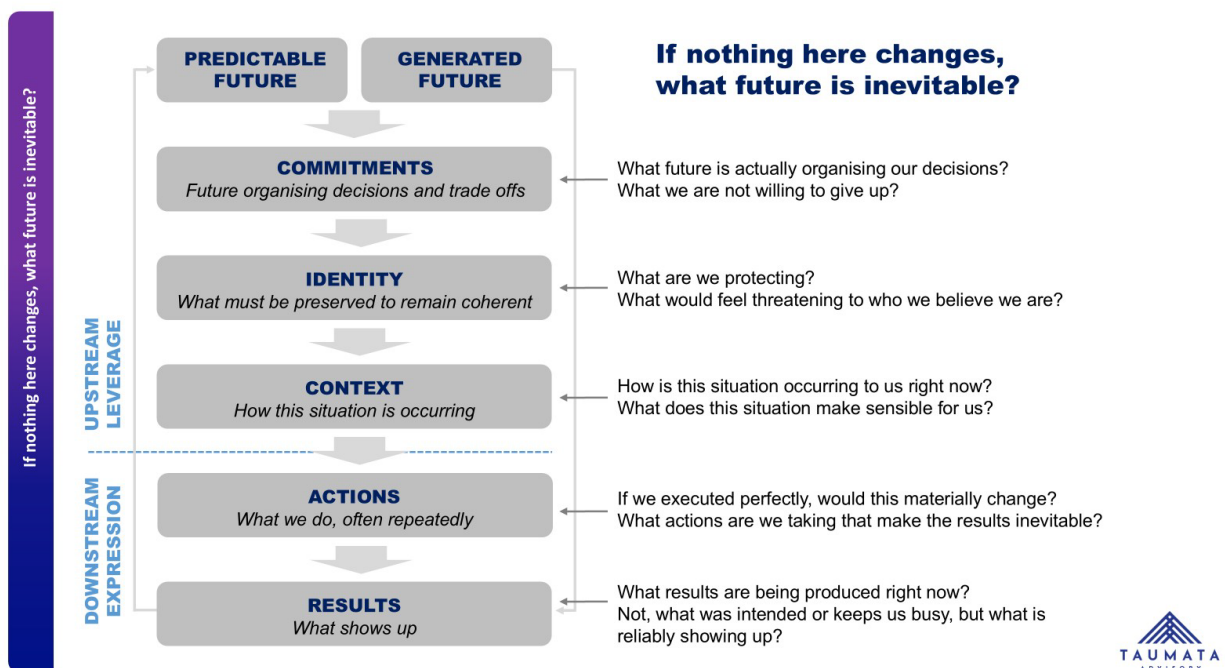
Appendix – The Operating Primer in Practice

This appendix translates the Operating Primer into a working diagnostic and design framework for leaders, teams and organisations. It is not conceptual – it is operational.

Complete this diagnostic with your executive team within the next quarter. Do not delegate it to HR. Do not soften the language. Treat it as a Board-level risk assessment.

The Core Causal Flow

The Operating Primer describes a structural sequence: Commitment → Identity → Context → Action → Results



Each layer determines the one beneath it. Results are not random – they are produced. If you want different Results, you must identify which layer is organising and producing them, without just a narrow focus on Actions.

Layer 1: Results

Start with evidence. What Results are currently being produced?

- Financial outcomes.
- Strategic progress.

- Cultural indicators.
- Talent retention.
- Decision velocity.
- Innovation cadence.

Describe them without narrative. Then ask: Are these Results predictable given how we currently operate? If the answer is yes, you are looking at a stable system. The question becomes: what is stabilising it?

Layer 2: Action

- What behaviours are consistently occurring?
- What decisions are routinely made?
- What conversations are avoided?
- Where is accountability enforced or softened?
- What trade-offs are repeatedly chosen?

Look for patterns, not isolated events. Action reveals operative Identity. If empowerment is declared but decisions are frequently reclaimed, the operative Identity is control. If long-term value is declared but quarterly optics dominate trade-offs, the operative Identity is short-term validation.

Do not argue with the data; instead, observe it. It is a signal of something, not a judgment.

Layer 3: Identity

Identity determines what feels legitimate. Ask:

- What kind of leader do I experience myself as needing to be in this system?
- What must I protect? Image? Competence? Likeability? Control?
- What feels too risky to inhabit?
- What conversations feel structurally unavailable?

Then test the gap: What Identity would be required for the future we have declared? Where is the mismatch? This is usually the hinge. Most performance ceilings are not capability gaps. They are Identity constraints.

Layer 4: Commitment

What future has been declared? Not in aspirational language. In structural terms:

- What are we willing to be measured against?
- What would make failure visible?
- What would we refuse to compromise?

If Commitment is vague, Identity will default to inheritance. If Commitment is sharp, Identity must adjust. Weak Commitment produces a moderated Identity. Clear Commitment exposes misalignment.

Layer 5: Context

Context expresses itself through patterns rather than policy. It is visible in how meetings are designed, how decisions are escalated, how performance is evaluated, how informal influence operates, and how everyday work is coordinated. These patterns either make the declared Identity easier to inhabit or quietly contradict it.

Ask: Do the daily patterns of coordination reinforce the Identity we have declared, or do they pull behaviour back toward the familiar?

Alignment is the aim.

Coaching Application

In executive coaching, the Operating Primer is used to:

1. Diagnose where Results are stabilised.
2. Surface the inherited past-based Identity.
3. Clarify declared Commitment.
4. Translate Commitment into required Identity.
5. Identify structural misalignment in Context.
6. Design behavioural experiments that stabilise authored Identity.

The work is iterative and friction is expected. The aim is not insight alone – it is sustained alignment.

Enterprise Application

In organisational transformation, the sequence is similar but scaled:

1. Declare a non-negotiable future.
2. Define the Identity the enterprise must inhabit.
3. Audit Context for structural contradiction.
4. Redesign incentives, governance and meeting architecture.
5. Reinforce behaviour publicly and consistently.
6. Measure Results against the declared Commitment.

Transformation fails when any layer is ignored.

- Action-only change stalls.
- Context-only change breeds cynicism.
- Identity-only change exhausts leaders.
- Commitment-only change remains rhetorical.

Coherence is the requirement.

Final Note

The Operating Primer is not a motivational framework – it is a structural one. If Results are predictable, the system is coherent. If you want different Results, change the coherence.

That means:

- Sharpen Commitment.
- Author Identity.
- Design Context.
- Align Action.
- Sustain under pressure.

The ceiling is not mysterious. It is mechanical. And mechanisms can be redesigned.



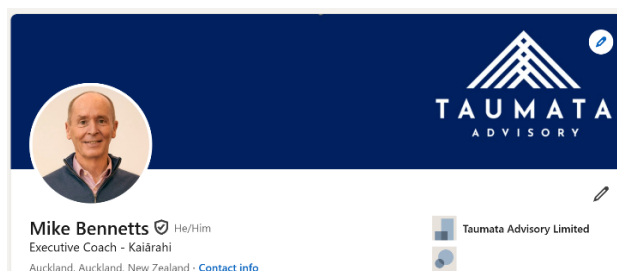
Realising Individual and Organisational Potential

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 various formats, including one-to-one sessions, team meetings, development programs, and workshops.
- 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 the transfer of mindsets and practices that enhance a leader's capability to deliver extraordinary results in future commitments.
- 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 contact Mike at mike@taumataadvisory.com, including options for workshops, based on the contents of this book, that enable you and your team to develop the practices that turn your leadership into a breakthrough.



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