

Not another book on Leadership!

# **Introduction**

## **Not another book on leadership!**

Well, yes, another one! And I suspect it won't be the last one either. But I want to believe that this is a different one. This is mainly a long conversation with yourself, with me, perhaps with others. It is also based upon a novel idea: let's find out what the questions are before giving answers. A second unusual idea: I used plain English as much as I could !

I don't know you and I don't know where you are. Where you spend your working life. Perhaps as leader in a corporation, or in an NGO, or in government, or in education, or the Church, or a religious institution. In the private or the public sector. All I know is that you are reading this and something somewhere must have made you do it.

What an intriguing issue. Academics, practitioners, consultants, self-help gurus, generals, priests, rabbis, imams, political leaders and community workers are romancing, framing, developing and playing with the idea of leadership. It has been happening for a long, long time. The leadership shop is big. The bookshelves are full.

We have a wealth of surveys and data, categories and taxonomies, lists of leadership competences and styles. We have case studies and biographies, confessions of success and failure, supporters of charisma and supporters of an almost

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invisible leadership. We seem to have more information, knowledge and stories on the subject than we can handle. So, why does it still feel as if we know nothing about leadership?

Business school frameworks and executive development programmes tend to look at this from a rather short-sighted modern world perspective. Yes, philosophy, history and literature have always addressed leadership in one form or another. But the business and organizational world is still impermeable to anything outside their traditional borders. Seeing things from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century organization, the latest ‘framework’ and the latest ‘research findings’, it all seems novel, cute, well-labelled, blessed by the brand of any well-known guru and elevated to gospel by the names of ‘the experts’. But we are kidding ourselves with the pretended novelty of many modern classifications of leadership or ... of anything, for that matter. “*There is nothing new under the sun*”, as the Greeks said. But the modern world, the post-modern world and the post-9/11 one (it is impossible to avoid this punctuation in history) all struggle with learning from the past *and* with not getting too hooked on it. It’s a moving target. Past or present? Constantine or Jack Welch? Just kidding.

### ► *Leadership for all seasons?*

Leadership as a topic is ranked higher than ever in the list of things to pay attention to, whether this is in a business organization, an NGO, a political party, the Churches, or any association of human beings trying to make sense of the future. From institutions such as the UN to initiatives such as fighting AIDS: the question of leadership is hot. And yet, it is

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sometimes difficult to know what exactly people are talking about.

This business of ‘leadership’ seems and feels both old and new, easy and difficult, ‘big thing’ and trivialized at the airport bookstore. We are trying to capture a fascinating phenomenon, and, frankly, any help, ‘map’, study and framework is welcome. But if you are looking for the *definitive* method and the *final* unquestionable ten-laws-of, you have a problem. Just think for a second. We are trying to understand something that has been attributed to Mother Theresa, Sir Richard Branson, Hitler, Bill Gates, Churchill, Gandhi, Jack Welch, Khmer Rouge’s Pol Pot, Tony Blair and Jonny Garcia. Yes, all of them.

What? You don’t know who Jonny Garcia is? Me neither, because he is somebody who has never made headlines. He works as a field community worker in a remote area of a remote country and, believe me, judging by the hundreds of people who follow him, admire him, would die for him and count on him, he is a great leader. We just don’t know him. He is invisible to us.

### ► *Models and caricatures*

The ‘example of’ (leadership) territory is also a curious one. There is a plethora of books taking the life of any public figure and recommending it for ‘leadership thinking’. One used to have to wait until people were dead, won a war or liberated a country, but apparently now all that is needed, is that they are out-of-office or just a public figure/role-model/global entertainer (and those borders are getting

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blurred.) So, in the airport bookstore, leadership à la Colin Powell (the military has always been a good factory of these) rubs shoulders with leadership à la Mandela, à la Thatcher and à la Bush. Other shelf-companions range from football players to Formula-1 racers and round-the-world-solo-sailors. I can't comment on the latter, because the combination of leadership and sport has always interested me as much as the history of 18<sup>th</sup> century farming in New Zealand. Apologies for the bias.

Seriously, what do all these people have that justifies grouping them under one single universal adjective: Leader? What is it? Would it perhaps be worth pulling all those 'lives' together, detailing all qualities and attributes of these publicly-declared leaders, entering them into the-mother-of-all-mathematical-analysis and hoping that a printout would give us 'the answer'? Well, it has been tried. Not always using maths, but certainly through hundreds - if not thousands - of biographies and meta-biographies. The result? A rich supermarket of traits, qualities, attitudes, behaviours and 'examples of'.

Do you want them? Do you fancy guidelines, mirrors, inspirations? No problem. The Big Supermarket of Leadership literature, leadership development and leadership training has it. When you put together all the attributes that have been 'found' or have been proven successful for leaders, you quickly reach a conclusion: short of walking on water (and only Moses came close to that, only surpassed by Jesus Christ himself), anything goes. So those lists are only of relative help.

We are told that leaders have integrity, enthusiasm, resilience, fairness, humility, warmth and confidence, to quote a well-

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respected 'study'. So, if you are an integral, warm, resilient, humble, fair and confident chap, does that make you a leader? Or do leaders share those attributes with non-leaders? And if so, what's all the fuss about the ('research') list?

To 'elevate this confusion to a higher level', it would probably also be safe to say that what has worked in one place, may not necessarily work in another. Similarly, that what has worked before, may not work now. Pretty gloomy conclusion for those who love a predictable world.

But let's be a bit kinder. Is there really anything wrong with that rich supermarket of findings on qualities, attributes or behaviours? Not really. They serve good conversation and possibly inspiration. But it doesn't quite solve the problem of YOU or ME becoming a leader. Because - and I'm speaking for myself here - I don't have the flamboyant entrepreneurship cum exhibitionism of a Richard Branson, I am not leading a country to independence dressed in a handkerchief, I can't craft those Churchillian speeches, I am definitely not running General Electric and clearly - believe me! - I am no Mother Theresa either.

So, it is not worth 'studying' all these people, right? The answer to that question varies: no, yes and maybe. I have just said that any help is welcome. Looking at what these 'big leaders' do or have done, may be helpful if the result is a trigger for reflection and maybe an inspiration for a translation into our more mundane life. It's not helpful if the result is to put you off forever. Let me explain. If you are fascinated by the so-called charisma of Richard Branson and believe that he truly represents your ideal leader, you may decide to call it a day if you think that your genes would never

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allow for any Bransonian extravaganza. If you are at some level of managerial responsibility in an organization and admire the brilliance of the rhetoric of ‘Somebody-Leader’, but you feel you are not the verbal type, you may decide that your progression in the organization is limited. And so on. In my professional career, I have seen many people - more than I expected - giving up on the idea of ‘the leadership thing’ because of the association of the concept with the grandiose, the great and the CEOs. And therefore, it was not for them.

I believe that to look at all those ‘examples of leadership’ is helpful, but only if you are able to rise above the images, the ideas, the leadership programmes, the names and their lives, the surveys, the checklists of attributes, the sets of qualities and look yourself in the mirror and ask the question: “*OK, why not? I’m no Branson, no Gandhi, no Welch, but I can be a pretty good leader if...*”

Right, we have found the ‘if’.

Let me introduce you to this book by sharing its premises:

### [1] What’s leadership?

This is my definition. It is the ability to exercise meaningful influence on others who voluntarily accept it, leaving behind a visible legacy of collective impact.

These keywords are relevant:

- **Influence:** it may be translated in different forms: inspiration, reflection, sense of meaning, direction or, very possibly (but not necessarily and/or not always apparent), action!

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- **Meaningful:** I am assuming some magnitude or substantial degree, a directional change, a lasting impact, almost even, dare I say, teleological. I mean the provision of big-time meaning and purpose, not the short term ephemeral impact.
- **Others:** the old definition of 'leader' (i.e. the one who has a follower) has not yet been matched by any academic!
- **Voluntarily:** I am sorry, but it is not good enough that somebody has been declared my leader. Unless I accept it, there is no real leader. There may be an official party leader, team leader, executive leadership team or Supreme Leader, and I may even be resigned to using the terms BUT I am the only one who decides who my leader is. Let me expand on this. Leaders become, dictators arrive. Leadership is something that you earn, which means that there must be somebody giving it to you. That means there are followers. You can be my boss, my dictator, my inquisitor or my king by decree. But you can only be my leader when I say so and I ask you, and - incidentally - it would be nice if you accepted.
- **Legacy:** Here, a whole spectrum of possibilities applies: from the wonderful memories to the big mess. But it must be something that's left behind.

**[2] To be or to become a leader or to enhance one's ability, you need to practice it.**

To practice leadership, you need 'a map' and lots of questions. We are far from a shortage of answers – remember those shelves - but we're not sure we have the right questions. So we may just be kidding ourselves with sets of beautiful answers to the wrong questions. This book is mainly about questions, and:

- The answers to these questions are personal.
- Unfortunately, the consequences of your answers are not. Other people at work, home, party, church, organization or in the wider society depend on them. No pressure...

If after reading this or other books, attending my or other seminars, getting other help and other triggers, it is not obvious to you *what to practice*, I think you'll have a problem (if you still aspire to be or become a leader). Note that I say *what to practice*, not whom to emulate.

You'll know that you are a leader when others think of you in that way voluntarily. "*The proof of the pudding is in the eating*", my fellow compatriot Miguel de Cervantes said around 1615. The proof of your leadership capabilities is in the response and nature of your followers.

**[3] The 'praxis' of leadership has different faces.**

The practice of leadership may be helped by recognizing that the difficulty in making sense of the plethora of 'examples' is not necessarily that it consists of a mix of heroes, villains, charlatans, moralists, dictators, saviours, psychopaths and

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normal people. That mix is obviously an intellectual challenge in itself (!), because, if nothing else, it's difficult to have an uncontaminated and clinical view of it without attaching a judgement to each 'case'. The Mother Theresa case is good, the Hitler case is bad. Sure, but that won't take us far.

The real difficulty, however, is one of presentation. Leadership is polyhedral, pardon my language. You can be looking at one of the polygons and get excited about it, only to realize that there are others just as exciting on the other side of the three-dimensional solid.

Yes, the leader has seven faces. In some leaders, only one or two are visible. When those leaders are proposed as examples or role models, the only faces of leadership we see are the ones they show us. When you as leader are 'in front' of your people, perhaps one or two faces are visible. But there are others, equally important. These seven faces are:

- **What leaders say.** Rhetoric, language, words... matter. Many organizations are stuck on something (strategy, process improvement, change) because they do not possess 'another language'. Leaders provide 'language' and meaning, a framework in which action can take place. If this is their visible face, leaders look more like teachers and educators, and language and meaning become the most visible traits.
- **Where leaders go.** Leaders go places and take people with them. Some of them have a pretty good idea of the destination, perhaps too good an idea. Others are more of the type who 'enjoy the journey'. However, if this is the visible face, both look more like

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cartographers, explorers or conquistadores. Life around them inevitably revolves around these themes of destiny and pathways.

- **What leaders build.** Leaders are builders of organizations or ‘projects’. They build purpose and they build places. Places to be, to enhance people, to work in, to think, to do, to succeed, to attract people, to navigate through life. They build other things such as trust and relationships. If this is their predominant face, they look more like architects. ‘Space’ and its sister ‘Time’ are favourite themes around them.
- **What leaders care about.** Finding this face of the leader is not difficult, because what they care about forms their language and behaviour. See what the leader says, observe what the leader does, see if it matches and you will discover the value system behind it! When this is the main visible face, these leaders may look more like moralists or teachers, even if they may not necessarily use the language of morality. But what this face shows is mainly beliefs. Beliefs seem to form everything else.
- **How leaders do it.** Worrying about how things happen is prominent in some leaders. Very often, the ‘how’ is seen in our culture as ‘a detail’ or ‘a by-product’. But some leaders don’t see it like that. The way of doing things matters to them and this is their most visible face. When this is the case, they look more like stage managers focusing on styles, ways, dynamics, and plots. ‘Ways of doing’ may kill good

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visions. These leaders know it and worry about ‘the how’ almost above everything else.

- **What they are.** This is a sometimes difficult face to understand. Perhaps the best way to do this, is to refer to famous lines from the Jewish text *The Ethics of the Fathers*: “*If you don’t look after yourself, who will?*” First stop. It looks pretty selfish, but it’s enormously healthy, because it’s prompting non-dependence on others. “*If you only look after yourself, what are you?*” Second stop here. This is a powerful question. Note the ‘what’, not ‘who’. “*What am I?*” is probably the most important question of our navigation system in the world. And third and last stop: “*If not now, when?*”

Some leaders worry about the ‘what-we-are’ and, if this is their predominant face, they look like identity seekers, rather constantly referring to a sense of belonging. Sometimes they look like historians as well, because identity and belonging are above everything else, with one eye on the past and another on the future. Awareness of themselves and others, including emotions, is very visible in them.

- **What leaders do.** This behavioural face is always fascinating. It is often the most ‘visible’ and one that is easier to refer to, mainly to imitate. What leaders do - or don’t do – matters; for some people more than anything else (i.e. what they say, or build, or think...). This ‘action-face’ is certainly enormously important and the engine of the building of other dimensions, such as reputation and trust. It is powerful, both in its

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building and its destroying potential. Some leaders seem to have great ability to generate action around them, often seen as the only relevant dimension for themselves and the organization behind them. When the emphasis is on the doing and the main visible face is action, leaders sometimes look like heroes, or company acrobats, pointing to outcomes and measurements.

### ► *Do you have to practice everything?*

Our face reflects our soul, our being. We are used to it! We see it in the mirror every day. We may like it or not (!), but we are certainly familiar with it! That leadership face that you or others see, probably *is/represents* your main zone of comfort. You may be a natural doer who tends to focus on where to go, and then goes there! If so, you may tend to dismiss questions of style, beliefs or even ‘ways of doing’. You will be tempted to practice leadership with that face and that is the only one that others will see. Nothing wrong with that, but remember that other people may react better to other faces; for example, the one of language, or values, or identity. I don’t know. You could be better off practicing leadership with other faces. You may discover your hidden ones in the process!

Don’t stay in your comfort zone. Practice all faces if you can! Practicing leadership with seven faces is NOT about ‘perfect’ leadership. It is about being sensitive to a very complex reality, the one of your business organization, or your non-profit institution, or your church, or your political party. In this incredibly complex reality, what leaders say, where they go and take people, what they build, what they care about,

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how they do it, 'what' they are and what they really do, matters equally. The leader with seven faces is a leader for a future that has already started.

### ► *My subjective world*

When I decided to write this book, I had many choices in front of me. Let me explain why I chose this one. I am a psychiatrist through background and professional experience. I practiced Medicine for about fifteen years and then I joined senior management ranks in the pharmaceutical industry on both sides of the Atlantic. I spent another fifteen years or so working for three different companies until I co-founded The Chalfont Project Ltd, an organizational consulting firm that I lead. Like any other life - yours perhaps - it has been a rollercoaster ride. But I feel privileged.

It would not make sense to summarize my 'learning' in bullet-points like a report sent to your manager. But some things - semi-connected themes - have struck me time and time again along the way:

- 1) Human behaviour is incredibly complex. What a statement! Psychology and Psychiatry are trying hard to find clues for every 'why'. But each time they think they have achieved something, they come up with a label that frames the issue (abnormal behaviour, for example) and gives some sense of comfort. Practitioners then know what to do or not to do. This is good news for their comfort and often good news as well for the individual who needs help. But it is far from providing a deep insight and understanding of the individual. Management

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(Sciences, studies and education) is no different but it is usually more superficial. We fabricate an enormous amount of things (frameworks, classifications, competence sets, checklists...) that help us navigate. But again, this is far from giving us a deep understanding of what is really going on inside the organization! Leadership as a concept is the same. We can put all the studies together, all the theories and classifications and all the lists of 'qualities' and who knows, we might have some sort of language. Less good news: we may still not get to the bottom of what leadership *is*.

- 2) Early in my pharmaceutical industry life - which I found fascinating at first and a world apart from medical practice - I began to wonder why some organizations seemed to succeed, attract people and mobilize internal energy and why others - very often similar in size and culture - looked pretty pathetic and hopeless. In hindsight, the question now seems less grandiose or original, but at the time it kept coming to my mind. It didn't take me a lot more time to realize that the quality of characters in the organizational zoo didn't seem to correlate with anything. I found uninspiring leaders running entire departments apparently well, and inspirational leaders in charge of a mess, which made one wonder if it had been created by them. The complexity and sophistication of processes and systems didn't ensure success either. Compared with the world I was coming from - clinical and academia - the 'industry' was a Rolls Royce in information management, for example. But exciting as this was, it didn't ensure success either.

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- 3) Leadership was progressively climbing the ladder of my list of interests as a 'place to find the clue'. Throughout my working history, I have made some evolving observations:
- a) Over all these years, I have found very few good leaders. I have found many people in top positions for whom the single, recurrent, nagging question I have had is: "*How on earth did they get there?*" The worst, most dangerous leaders I have found are the ones who appeared honest, ethical, people-oriented, compassionate, value-driven and even overtly religious, and who turned out behaving like little bastards. Their danger lies in their unexpected behaviour. Some of these 'leaders' used what I will describe later on in this book as the 'It's-the-system-not-me' argument to justify their - in some cases plainly inhumane – actions.
  - b) I am now convinced that leadership is a practice that benefits from repetitive action and may even inversely correlate with how much we talk about it or how we use the label!
  - c) I am also convinced that all of us have the potential to be a leader, possibly in different degrees, and that we can 'go for it', armed with some convictions and the desire to achieve things.

Over the last five odd years, I have led leadership executive development programmes with my clients and have constantly learned from them. This book represents a 'stop-and-capture-it' and will no doubt evolve with further editions. But, as I

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said, I had choices. I could use a significant amount of bibliography and references for the great and good of academia and consulting, and give the next pages a pseudo-scientific-experienced-academic-management-consulting validation. I could quote and re-quote the gurus. I could contrast frameworks and theories. I could ‘critically analyze’ positions and premises. I could propose trends and mega-trends. I could do any or all of the above, or I could simply bypass all of this and get straight into sharing some thoughts and experiences, bringing all insights together and providing you with lots of questions for which - very often - I haven’t found answers myself. And in the process invite you to come along to find the answers.

I have mentioned before that this book is mainly ‘a book of questions’. My years of leadership experience, my three professional qualifications in both science and business, my three careers and my (greying) hair loss have taught me that there is one single, overriding, most important management question. Everything else is totally secondary. That question is: “*What’s the question?*” I will refer to this again in one of the chapters.

The ability to ask questions is a sign of leadership maturity. The ability to provide answers is not. If each time we were about to jump into action - analyse a 1,000-page market research report, draw a product development plan, create a recruitment and retaining HR strategy, produce the PowerPoint package for the retreat or sign that big capital expenditure - we stopped and thought and asked the question: “*What’s the question I am trying to answer?*”...if we could do that, we would jump a few years in our collective leadership

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evolution... If I were to propose one single management education recipe, this would be the one.

This is a long explanation to tell you that you will not find comprehensive bibliographies and many references to theories of leadership in this book. When I do some of the above, it will be minimal and relevant to the conversation.

## How to read /use this book

Follow the order of the seven faces or start anywhere. It's your choice. In each of the faces there is a conversation about three themes. Why those themes? This is important as an understanding between you and me: I am not pretending to create a comprehensive list of themes for each of the faces. I am not objective with you, nor am I interested in being objective with you.

The themes are very subjective because I am sharing my best assets with you: my experience. I am not trying to convey to you that I am in the possession of the truth. I would like to invite you to consider those themes and associated questions as a starting point for your own discovery. In the process, you will come up with many other themes and questions. I finish each chapter with an initial list of questions to trigger new ones in you.

- Reflect upon them and see if there are others, not listed but triggered in you by the conversation.
- Attribute a value: Is that very relevant to me? Is it new? Is it old but still valid? Intriguing?

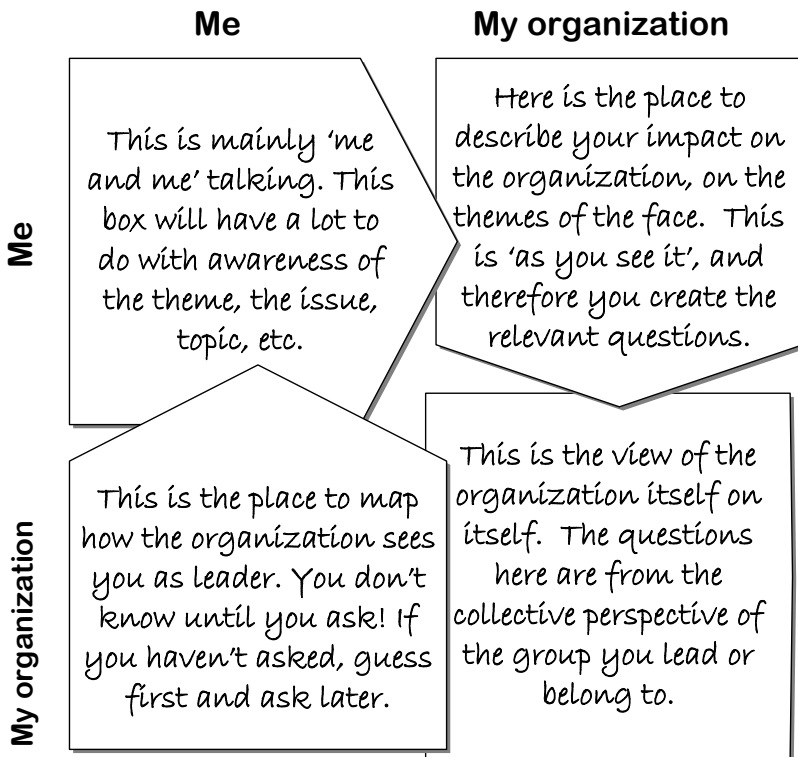
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- Check your status – how are you doing on these?
- How are you going to cultivate that face of leadership?
- Create an action and a mechanism in order to - what else? - practice it!

There is also a simple graph at the end of each chapter/face called 'Action Map', which intends to host all these key questions. The ones inside the boxes in each of the chapters are simple starting points. These graphs look like this:

### **ACTION MAP**

*(some first pass questions)*



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Use the blank spaces to make notes! Write some thoughts, more questions, some answers, anything!

Other ways? Of course, there are. I'm sure I can leave it to your imagination! However, if you're strapped for inspiration, here are some suggestions:

- Read it as a team exercise. Block sixty minutes each month and bring your team together to discuss 'one face'. Read the chapter and debate it. Try to deal with 'the questions' and see if you can get some collective 'answers'.
- Take a personal approach. Read it in whatever order you want and try to make it the basis of a personal plan. Take notes, write in it, highlight, rewrite...
- If you are in some sort of coaching programme or leadership development, take this book along as your companion, as a map to progress and move forward.

Let's go!