# Let's Talk Leadership

*The Psychology of Power, Presence, and Purpose in Modern Leadership*



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**For Emma and Elian**

You are my reminder that strength can be gentle and that presence is the deepest form of love. May you grow into yourselves with courage, curiosity, and joy, never bending who you are to be who the world expects. I will spend my life being a place where you are always safe.

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# PART ONE

*LEADERSHIP AS A CONCEPT*

# WHY ON EARTH (INTRODUCTION)

It's 2025, and war is raging in Ukraine and Gaza as people all over the world suffer, struggle, and try to survive. What would help them more than a book on leadership, right? No, of course not. This attempt is not born out of any real necessity or urgency. It's born out of pure irritation, contempt, and frustration. In a world teeming with self-proclaimed experts, the manure surrounding leadership could fertilize an entire continent. And that's worrying, if you consider leadership being the driver and intrinsic motor behind almost all change. Without it, we would have chaos, deterioration, and probably civil wars. And with it, apparently, we still do. Why?

Most people can't organize themselves in a coherent format. A lot of people aren't even able to construct a decent life. That's why we have politics, society, religion, and mental institutions. However, there is a species of people—leaders—who can construct change, energize and inspire others, and see where opportunities lie and development is possible. We need these people more than ever.

However, if you watch the news, read the papers, and listen to the conversations next to the coffee machine, you'll hear that people "hate" leaders. First, they're all narcissists. They can't feel, can't tune in to other people's emotions, and like to abuse the weak. And above all, they only take care of themselves, making insane amounts of money and driving luxury cars. Boo, boo, boo. The weak are morally superior but are abused by the rich and famous. Does that ring a bell? *Animal Farm* indeed. But this neo-Marxist point of view, explaining the world based on binary truths, is just incorrect. And it's dangerous, because without a correct understanding of leadership, the world will be a mess forever.

My goal with this book is to give you as a reader a realistic base of knowledge to work with leaders as well as take good care of them, helping them help others.

Please enjoy and make sure to get in touch with your thoughts.

**Arvid Buit**, May 12, 2025

# CHAPTER 1 – THE NARRATIVE (AND REASON TO WRITE)

Every leader lives inside a story. It is rarely written down, and almost never consciously chosen, yet it determines every decision, every meeting, every sleepless night before a board presentation. This story (the narrative) is the invisible script that connects your childhood learning about safety and love to your adult habits of power and control. It is the voice that tells you what success should look like, what failure must never mean, and who you have to become in order to belong. When I meet a new leader, I often start by finding out, "What's your story?" using a biographical timeline. The first answers are factual: the company's story, the market story, sometimes even the nation's story. Only after silence arrives does the personal narrative surface: "I've always needed to prove I can handle it." Or, "If I stop performing, they'll see I'm not enough." These sentences may sound trivial, but they are the engine rooms of identity. They reveal how people have learned to link their worth to their performance and their safety to control.

Psychology has known this for a century. Freud called it "repetition compulsion"[1]: the unconscious drive to recreate familiar emotional patterns until they are finally recognized and resolved. Bowlby[2] spoke of "attachment scripts," the deep expectations we form about how others will respond to our needs. Erik Erikson[3] described the lifelong negotiation between autonomy and intimacy, mastery and care. Each theory, in its own way, points to the same truth: adults do not outgrow their childhood stories; they merely give them new costumes. For leaders, this narrative becomes amplified by context.

**An executive role magnifies the inner script the way a microphone magnifies a whisper.**

The need for approval turns into the hunger for shareholder applause. The fear of abandonment becomes the dread of losing key talent. The wish to be helpful mutates into overfunctioning for everyone else's comfort.

**Power does not change who we are; it enlarges what was already there.**

Understanding this is the foundation of leadership development.

Most executive programs try to add knowledge, more tools, models, frameworks. But genuine transformation begins by subtracting illusion. Before you can grow, you must first measure what story you are telling yourself about growth. If that story says, "Change is failure," or, "Rest means weakness," then no amount of methodology will help. You will sabotage every attempt to evolve because your narrative defends its own continuity. In therapy and in executive coaching alike, we sometimes call this the *protective story* (or *survival strategy*). It once served you well. Perhaps perfectionism earned parental praise, or charm defused conflict at home. Those strategies were intelligent solutions for a child navigating dependency. The problem is not the story's origin, but the failure to update it. Adults who still chase love through achievement are like companies that run on outdated operating systems: functional but fragile. Rewriting the narrative does not mean erasing the past, but editing the meaning. Even in extreme constraint, humans retain the freedom to decide how to interpret events. That interpretive act, assigning a new meaning to an old pattern, is the birthplace of maturity.

In my coaching sessions, I sometimes draw two circles. The inner circle represents facts: what actually happened. The outer circle represents interpretation: the narrative we attach to those facts. Between the two lies all human suffering and all potential. A leader who confuses the circles will fight reality itself. "The board betrayed me," they say, when in truth the board made a strategic choice. "My team doesn't care," when in truth the team mirrors the leader's own disengagement. The task is not to deny emotion, but to separate the factual from the fictional long enough to decide what deserves rewriting.

Attachment theory provides another lens. Securely attached individuals internalize the belief that relationships can hold tension without collapse. Insecurely attached individuals, by contrast, read tension as danger. In the boardroom this becomes visible in milliseconds: the avoidantly attached leader withdraws into intellect; the anxiously

attached one floods the room with control. Both behaviors are narratives of safety. Both can be reauthored through awareness.

When you can observe the impulse without obeying it, the story begins to loosen. But the process of loosening is slow, often uncomfortable. Neuroscience shows[4] that the brain's default mode network (the circuitry that maintains our sense of self) treats narrative coherence as a survival function. It would rather be wrong than confused. This means that even false stories feel safer than no story. When you introduce change, the organism experiences narrative disintegration: "If I am not the one who always fixes everything, who am I?" Coaching, therefore, begins not with adding courage, but with tolerating ambiguity. The new story needs space to be born before it can be believed.

Consider a case from my own practice. (You'll see more of these as we go to help illustrate the ideas.) A CEO of a large logistics company described himself as "decisive." In reality, he was impulsive, firing off instructions the moment anxiety rose. The company was profitable, but the people working in it were exhausted. When we unpacked his patterns, he remembered being the eldest child in a chaotic household. Acting fast had once been his way to create order. The behavior was brilliant then, but destructive now. As Marshall Goldsmith[5] once brilliantly wrote, "What got you here won't get you there." Over several months, this CEO practiced delaying intervention whenever panic struck. The first few times he felt physical agitation, even nausea. But eventually his nervous system learned a new story: the world can survive without my immediate control. That single narrative shift (from "urgency is safety" to "patience is power") transformed his company's culture. This is why leadership development cannot be outsourced. Consultants can design structures, but only you can rewrite your inner logic. The narrative lives in micro-choices: how you enter a room, how you pause before answering, how you interpret silence. One of my personal mentors used to say, "Every leader teaches people how to feel around them." Your narrative is not private; it becomes contagious. If you are driven by fear, your organization will run on anxiety. If you are grounded in curiosity, they will learn to explore.

**People don't copy what you say; they copy what you regulate.**

The Greek notion of *praxis* (action informed by reflection) describes the mature integration of thought and deed. Aristotle wrote that excellence is "not an act but a habit,"[6] yet he also knew habits are the sediment of countless stories. We behave as though the world were the story we believe. Change the story, and behavior follows. Modern cognitive psychology echoes this: cognitive reframing, narrative therapy, and schema coaching all work by altering the story-behavior loop.

But beware the modern trap of branding your story as identity. In the age of social media and corporate storytelling, leaders are urged to "own their narrative." That can easily become a new prison. The point is not to craft a more flattering myth; it is to stay agile between myths. True self-awareness includes the ability to say, "This version of me was useful once, but now it isn't." Flexibility of identity is the highest form of strength. In practice, I ask clients to write their story in the third person: "He grew up believing he had to be the smartest person in the room." "She learned that praise equals love." Seeing the narrative from outside reduces identification. Then we edit the script line by line, asking, "Is this still true? Is it helpful? Is it kind?" The goal is not perfection but authorship.

**To become the narrator rather than the character is the essence of psychological freedom.**

There is a beautiful parallel here with organizational life. Companies, like people, live by stories. Mission statements, values, brand promises—these are corporate myths. When those myths lose alignment with reality, dysfunction appears. The same applies internally: when your personal myth diverges from lived experience, you feel inauthentic. Authenticity is simply narrative coherence between belief and behavior. It cannot be faked for long; the body will always tell the truth through stress, fatigue, or cynicism. In psychoanalytic terms, this is the integration of ego and shadow. Jung[7] proposed that the parts we disown—our envy, anger, vulnerability—do not disappear. Instead, they go underground and act out through projection. Leaders who deny their shadow end up surrounded by people who embody it for them. The controlling boss attracts passive teams; the conflict-avoidant leader breeds politics. Bringing the shadow into narrative light is uncomfortable, but it restores

agency. You cannot lead what you refuse to acknowledge.

Over the years, I have come to see the narrative not as a static script but as a living organism. It evolves through dialogue. Every conversation you have either reinforces or rewrites part of it. This is why coaching works: it introduces a new language, and with new language comes new possibility. The brain encodes experience in words; when the vocabulary of change expands, so does behavior. Saying, "I am learning patience," activates different neural pathways than saying, "I am impatient." Yet the narrative is not just linguistic; it is embodied. Posture, breath, tone—these are important signs of your story.

Neuroscience confirms that body and mind are reciprocal systems: altering one alters the other. When I ask a client to lower their shoulders before addressing conflict, the message shifts from aggression to authority. So when we speak of rewriting the narrative, we are also rehearsing it physically, one meeting at a time. Every great transformation follows the same pattern. First comes dissonance: the old story no longer fits. Then denial: the mind defends the familiar. Then experimentation: new scenes are tested. And finally integration: the new narrative feels natural. The temptation is to rush this sequence, but development has its own tempo. As in music, silence is part of rhythm. Leaders who honor the pauses between chapters grow more sustainably than those who chase constant action.

There is, of course, a collective dimension. The personal narrative interacts with the organization's collective narrative, producing harmony or friction. When both stories align, culture feels coherent. When they clash, politics flourish. Later in this book we will explore the five perspectives that help you diagnose and steer that complexity, but they all depend on this first insight: you cannot understand a system without understanding the story that animates it.

So, before we move on, take a quiet moment and ask yourself, "What story am I living?" Not the professional biography, but the private logic beneath it. What sentence drives your mornings and haunts your nights? Maybe it is, "I must hold everything together." Maybe it is, "If I relax, I'll disappear." Whatever it is, honor it; it kept you alive. Then, with

compassion and precision, begin the author's work: decide which parts still serve you and which are ready to be rewritten. Leadership, at its deepest level, is not about control or charisma. It is about narrative mastery, the courage to face your own fiction and edit it in the direction of truth. Every board decision, every strategy, every act of mentorship begins here: in the private theater of your mind, where the story of who you are meets the story of who you could become. The rest of this book will give you the instruments to measure, compare, design, communicate, discipline, and inspire.

**But remember, none of those steps will matter unless you first recognize that you are, and always have been, the author.**

# CHAPTER 2 – THE COLLECTIVE (NEED FOR LEADERSHIP)

Every collective begins with chaos. Before vision, before structure, before anyone prints a strategy document, there is simply a group of human beings attempting to find safety and meaning together. That is what organizations are at their most primal level: communities built to reduce uncertainty.

**When people gather, they unconsciously search for hierarchy, rhythm, and belonging.**

Without these, they fall into anxiety. Leadership, then, is not merely functional; it is existential. It answers the most ancient group question: who will make sure we survive? In evolutionary terms, collectives form around protection and intent. The tribe that hunted together had a better chance of living through winter than the one that argued about logistics. The alpha was not necessarily the strongest, but the one who could hold fear for the group. Modern organizations are more sophisticated in language but not in psychology. Boardrooms are still camps around the fire. What has changed is that our dangers are abstract—quarterly results, brand crises, AI disruption—and our alliances are contractual rather than ancestral. Yet the emotional architecture remains identical. When uncertainty rises, the group instinctively looks for a leader to hold the anxiety.[8] Working as a kind of "trusted consigliere," I often observe this pattern in leadership teams. During calm periods, the collective can appear democratic and self-regulating. But introduce a threat—a sudden drop in share price, a negative media storm, or the departure of a key investor—and you will see regression in real time. Rational adults begin to act like anxious families: blame, secrecy, avoidance. The system starts searching for a parent figure, someone to contain the fear and reintroduce order. The need for leadership is not intellectual; it is mostly emotional.

Understanding this requires a lens beyond management theory. It is a psychological necessity rooted in attachment. John Bowlby[9] (the

father of attachment theory) wrote that the infant seeks proximity to a caregiver not only for physical safety but for emotional regulation. The leader's role in a collective mirrors this. They are the "secure base" from which others can explore. When that base is predictable, people dare to take risks, voice dissent, and innovate. When it is inconsistent or punitive, the system collapses into compliance and survival. The collective perspective asks a difficult question of leaders: whose anxiety are you holding? In a dysfunctional system, the leader is flooded with everyone else's emotions. They try to carry too much and begin to burn out. In an under-led system, anxiety disperses horizontally. Gossip, politics, and passive aggression fill the vacuum. Effective leadership distributes containment: the leader absorbs uncertainty but also models self-regulation so the team gradually learns to hold its own. In theory, this sounds elegant; in practice, it is exhausting.

I once worked with a CEO of a large healthcare company who came to me saying, "I feel like a single parent of three thousand people." He wasn't wrong. His organization was talented but addicted to dependency. Every problem was escalated to him. When we examined the pattern, we found that he had unconsciously taught the company that his approval was a necessity. It came from his personal history, with a childhood where love had to be earned through performance. The collective had simply mirrored his psychology. The company's culture was a projection of its leader's attachment style.

**This is the uncomfortable truth about collectives: they do not evolve beyond the level of awareness of their leaders.**

Systems theory confirms this: What cannot be spoken in the hierarchy becomes acted out at the bottom. A leader who cannot tolerate conflict breeds teams that gossip. A board that avoids vulnerability produces managers obsessed with data. Conversely, a leader who is grounded, curious, and self-reflective becomes a regulatory force for the entire collective. Emotional maturity trickles down faster than any corporate initiative. But collectives are not static organisms. They are living ecosystems with tides of cohesion and fragmentation. Every group oscillates between connection and differentiation, the desire to belong versus the need to stand out. Leadership's role is to balance these forces without suppressing

either. Too much cohesion, and you have conformity. Too much differentiation, and you have chaos. In organizational terms, this is the tension between alignment and innovation, standardization and autonomy. Healthy collectives allow both: a shared mission that accommodates individual truth. To achieve that balance, the collective must know why it exists. Without a shared intent, leadership degenerates into management of noise. The *why* functions as the gravitational center of meaning. Yet many organizations confuse intent with performance. They say, "We exist to be the best," which is not an intent but a competition. True intent speaks to contribution: What would the world lose if we disappeared? Leaders who articulate that question clearly give the collective something to organize around. It becomes a psychological compass.

The process of defining that collective *why* mirrors the developmental journey of an individual. Just as a person moves from dependency to autonomy to integration, organizations evolve from survival to achievement to significance. The leader's task is to sense the system's level of emotional maturity and adjust their style accordingly. A start-up full of adrenaline needs containment and focus; a mature corporation needs reawakening of playfulness and intent.

**Leadership is not a fixed stance but a dynamic dance with the collective's developmental stage.**

During the financial recession of 2020, I worked with a Dutch family-owned manufacturing company that had suddenly lost 40 percent of its revenue. The management team was paralyzed by fear. Meetings turned into "postmortems." The CEO, a second-generation owner, felt pressure from his father, the founder, who kept repeating, "You must save the legacy." When we spoke, I asked him what his people needed most. He said, "A plan." I said, "No, they need your calm." He began opening every meeting with a few seconds of silence, then sharing what he did not yet know. Slowly, the anxiety subsided. The company survived, not because of strategy but because the leader stabilized the collective nervous system.

This illustrates a vital insight: the collective does not need omnipotence; it needs orientation. Leaders make the mistake of thinking their authority

comes from answers. In truth, it comes from presence.

**You are not expected to know the future, only to help the group face it without denial.**

That means naming the uncertainty, framing it, and keeping the conversation open. Once people see that fear can coexist with honesty, they begin to act again.

Psychology teaches us that anxiety thrives in isolation.[10] When emotion is shared, it becomes tolerable. The same applies to organizations. The leader's job is to create psychological safety where fear can be expressed without shame. Amy Edmondson's research at Harvard[11] popularized the term, but the principle is ancient. Safety is not comfort; it is the absence of humiliation. A collective that feels safe will challenge its leader because it trusts the bond. A collective that feels unsafe will flatter and withhold, slowly rotting from within.

So how do you cultivate that kind of collective? It begins with dialogue. Leadership is a conversation, not a monologue. The collective perspective insists on "thinking out loud together." Plato[12] understood this long before management schools did. He wrote that truth emerges only in dialogue. The Socratic method was not a teaching style but an epistemology. In organizations, collective intelligence arises from multiple perspectives held in tension. The leader's role is to facilitate that tension until it yields insight rather than conflict. Practically, this means designing spaces for real thinking, not just reporting. Most executive teams are addicted to presentation mode: people defend slides instead of improving the quality of thinking. In my sessions, I sometimes remove all PowerPoints and ask each leader to bring questions instead of answers. The first fifteen minutes are uncomfortable, but then something magical happens. People begin to listen. They start to build on each other's thoughts rather than compete. That is the sound of a collective becoming more intelligent. Still, leadership of the collective is not pure democracy. Dialogue without a proper direction degenerates into debate. The leader must eventually converge. The art lies in knowing when. Premature closure kills creativity, but endless discussion kills progress. As someone told me once: "A good leader listens until the music stops, and then

decides." The collective respects decisiveness that emerges from genuine listening. It despises authority that hides insecurity behind arrogance.

From a systemic viewpoint, collectives also carry their own unconscious. This is the realm of unspoken norms, loyalties, and taboos, what family therapists call the "shadow of the system." Every organization has ghosts: the fired founder who still haunts decisions, the scandal that was never truly discussed, the cultural shame no one names. These ghosts influence behavior more than any policy. Part of leadership is to make the invisible visible. When you name the ghost, it loses power. When you ignore it, it runs the show. I remember working with a multinational whose senior team had endured a brutal merger. Officially, "post-merger integration" was complete. Unofficially, two tribes still existed: the "old guard" and the "newcomers." Productivity was fine, but morale was toxic. I proposed a symbolic exercise: each side would tell the story of the merger from its own perspective, and then from the other's. It was awkward, even absurd at moments. But afterward one of them said, "I finally see that we were both just trying not to be erased." The collective exhaled. That moment did more for performance than any reorganization ever could.

The need for leadership, then, is not about charisma or authority. It is about integration. The leader integrates anxiety, meaning, and difference into a coherent narrative that the group can inhabit. Without that, the collective fragments into silos of fear. With it, even painful change becomes bearable. This is why leadership cannot be replaced by algorithms.

**Technology can process information, but only human presence can metabolize emotion.**

In the coming chapters, we will explore how this collective understanding evolves into strategy, care, decision, and creativity. But it begins here, with recognizing that leadership is a social contract, renewed daily through trust. You cannot lead a collective you do not love, and you cannot love a collective you do not understand. Understanding requires curiosity about its emotional logic: why these people, at this moment, are together. If you skip that step, you will forever manage symptoms. Every

collective tells a story about its own survival. The leader's task is to listen for the unspoken ending—the fear, the hope, the unfinished sentence—and offer a new chapter. Leadership, in its essence, is the art of keeping the story of "us" alive when uncertainty threatens to end it. And that is why the world will always need leaders: not to command, but to hold the collective long enough for courage to reappear.