

# YOUR LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT

**How to Embrace Authenticity, Connection  
and Adaptability to Lead Impactful Change**



# YOUR LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT

JORIS  
NUIJTEN

**How to Embrace Authenticity, Connection  
and Adaptability to Lead Impactful Change**

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**WRITE BUSINESS RESULTS**

### **Fred Kofman**

Executive Coach, President at Conscious Business Center International, Best-selling author of "Conscious Business" and "The Meaning Revolution"

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"Although you may approach this book looking for productivity tools, its hidden gem lies a different dimension. Joris reminds us that the top regret of the dying is not living an authentic life. Consequently, he grounds leadership in being true to yourself. This is the source of moral authority. As opposed to managerial authority, moral authority enables a leader to evoke the internal commitment of her team members. Being an authentic example of excellence is the only way to inspire people to give their best to accomplish the team's mission expressing its values. With this "music" in your heart, dive into the text to find the right "instruments" to play!"

### **Mashad Bani Aman**

Partner at Deloitte Digital Amsterdam

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"This is a beautifully crafted book that underscores the non-linear nature of leadership development. It highlights the journey of leadership as one filled with loopbacks, ups and downs, all fueled by courage and continuous self-reflection. It conveys the genuine leadership message that becoming an effective leader starts from within; it's about becoming a better person from the inside out. **Your Leadership Toolkit** is a gem of invaluable resources, whether you are just beginning your leadership journey or are a seasoned executive. This book offers a

comprehensive toolbox that contains practical exercises, reflective questions and actionable strategies designed to enhance your leadership capabilities.

Joris' profound insights, enriched by his personal life experiences, will guide you in leading with authenticity, fostering meaningful connections and effectively adapting to change. His approach is not only practical, but deeply inspirational, making this book an invaluable source for anyone committed to personal growth and impactful leadership. A must-read for those who believe in the power of authenticity and the importance of leading from the heart."

### **Erik Grim**

Senior Director Supply Chain, Unilever

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**"Your Leadership Toolkit** is a hands-on book about leadership. The author has condensed an immense wealth of knowledge, experience and wisdom into a rich, yet very accessible and practical workbook. This book is not a compilation of theoretical models, but it is the practical application of those models, supported by many real life examples, which makes this book so extremely useful."

### **Zsoka Bernard**

Founder and CEO Balanzs Yoga & More

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"Joris possesses the perfect combination of wisdom and practical tools, driving you to take heartfelt action. This

book encapsulates his vast experience, providing invaluable insights and practical guidance at your fingertips. If you're looking to elevate your leadership skills and drive meaningful growth, this book is a must-read."

### **Joep Langen**

Co-founder Koeckebackers (social enterprise),  
Owner Purpose Brewery (Betekenisbrouwerij),  
Leadership Consultant

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"This beautiful handbook offers bite-sized leadership tips that help you fully harness your own and others' potential. With years of experience, Joris skillfully applies abstract leadership concepts to practical, real-world situations. His deep belief that true impact comes from self-knowledge and genuine connection is evident throughout the book. This is a must-read for anyone aiming to be a leader in the 21st century. It shows you exactly HOW!"

### **Michiel Kochen**

Owner Kochen Lasance Brave Business Behavior

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"**Your Leadership Toolkit** by Joris Nuijten is a practical and inspiring book that approaches leadership from multiple perspectives. Nuijten, with his years of experience as a leadership coach, offers an in-depth exploration of what it means to be an authentic and effective leader. Whether you are an experienced leader or just starting out, Nuijten's insights and practical advice will help you become more authentic, effective and resilient in your

leadership. This book is a must-read for anyone looking to make a positive impact in their organisation and beyond."

### **Loek Stalpers**

Strategic Advisor Water Management, Coach

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"This book invites you along on a personal journey of growth. Written in a clear and accessible way, it is a best-of toolkit of today's key insights on personal development, connection with others and leadership. The author provides appealing personal examples from his work and private life. This book is truly him. Each chapter concludes with questions that make you think, and invite reflection and action. Of all the appealing chapters, "Active Listening" is my favourite. How often are we preoccupied with our own thoughts and not really listening. Indeed, as said "a hugely underestimated life skill and one of the greatest gifts we can give each other", and therefore a "must read" chapter! This book is undoubtedly for anyone who wants to move forward in work or private life. Enjoy your journey!"

### **Sara Pfann**

Senior Data Architect, Owner Atelier Euforie,  
Alumnus MBA Big Data & Business Analytics

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"Reading the book took me back to the leadership development course given by Joris. The personal stories are so inspiring! I believe it is very important to make time and take a step back to reflect, as it gives the opportunity

to see who I am or who I want to be. This book provides a great handrail to do so."

**Sonja van Lint**

Global Senior Consultant Organisational,  
Team and Leadership Development, Shell

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"In this book Joris brings together all relevant leadership models and practices you should know. It's a joy to read as he explains them with all of his 25+ years' experience, stories, exercises and reflections! A must-have book for all leaders, future leaders and leadership development consultants! Read it!"



# Acknowledgements

If I were to do justice to all the people who have helped me, directly or indirectly, to write this book, I probably would need many more pages than I have available. I have immense gratitude for everyone who has contributed to the book which you are now reading.

Thank you to all the leaders who enabled me to follow my path over the last 25 years:

- The students and alumni of the Amsterdam Leadership Programme – MBA and Executive Finance students from Amsterdam Business School. I have had the honour of working with you, and being touched by your relentless passion to grow.
- The former and current staff of Amsterdam Business School, especially Alan Muller (who took a chance on me back in 2015), Sebastian Kortmann

(for his continuous support for the Amsterdam Leadership Programme), Peter Kroos and Frank Verbeeten (for initiating the leadership programme as part of the Executive Master Finance and Control), and many other inspiring staff including Jessica Fenega, Chaima Elachkari, Christo Sonnekus, Samuel Pronk, Wim Touber, Yasmine Ragheb, Linda van Wankum and Daniel van Heijningen.

- My fellow faculty at the Amsterdam Leadership Programme, current and previous: Joep Langen, Michiel Kochen, Kees Koetsier and Raymond van Driel.
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- The NGO leaders in Tanzania and Uganda whom I engaged with through the Libre Foundation. Thank you to Erik Bos and the team for the amazing work you are doing, allowing leadership practitioners to make an impact where it matters most.
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In my leadership development journey, I have learnt from many amazing leadership practitioners and coaches:

- Ruud Baanders was the first person who allowed me to experience what real coaching feels like, and thus inspired me to follow a similar path.
- Fred Kofman has been a role model for me in many different ways, not least by his integrity and humility. Working with him for several years in the context of the Strategic Leader Programme has been very influential for me.
- Nicole Cunningham-Snell is a leader who genuinely role models learner mindset, and consistently leads with empathy, courage and care. I feel blessed having worked with, and for her, for so many years already.
- Simon Lamb (Purposeful Change) and Caryn Vanstone (Lacerta Consulting) have been a beacon of inspiration to me over the last few years. Working with them, serving leadership teams in different places in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, has allowed me to witness world-class facilitation and leadership development.
- The Coaches Training Institute (CTI) and CRR Global, whose training in coaching and organisational relations and systemic work is still a foundation of my current work.
- Caerus Change (in particular Anouk Hulsboer and Nicole Toorenaar) who provided the Psychological Safety Scan training – exposing me to Amy Edmondson's work.
- My fellow Lead Anchor Facilitators, with whom I feel honoured to have jointly pursued a journey still ongoing for some, developing ourselves and each other, in a trusted safe space – thank you Will, Ruth, Kim, Seb, Marie, Michelle, Judy, Parm, Sonja and Winda.

The process of writing this book was not without its challenges, in fact several times throughout the journey I was very close to giving up. Fortunately, some dear friends of mine helped me keep going through these various phases and never stopped believing in me, and also were candid in providing me feedback. Special thanks go to Hajni Sagodi, Erik Grim, Joep Langen, Winda Evers, Sonja van Lint, Mark Thoënes, Esther Terheijden, Michiel Kochen, Kees Koetsier, Jolin van Eijck, Sara Pfann, Zsoka Bernard – and my sister Susan.

Thank you to Georgia Kirke from Write Business Results, and the content and editing team – including George, Kat and Ivan. Your professionalism, care and genuine belief in me is exactly what I needed during the process of writing this book. I can heartily recommend your professional services to anyone contemplating writing a book.

Any parts of the book that are inspiring or insightful to the reader – know that these are credited to all people mentioned above. And any mistakes or omissions, I am clearly to blame for myself.

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**“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.” – Marcus Tullius Cicero**

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# Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to all the leaders and teams I have had the honour of working with, and to the former, current and future students of the Amsterdam Leadership Programme – MBA and EMFC students at Amsterdam Business School/University of Amsterdam.

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**“Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary.”**  
**– N.H. Kleinbaum, Dead Poets Society<sup>1</sup>**

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1 Kleinbaum, N.H. (2012) Dead Poets Society. Disney Electronic Content

I would also like to dedicate this book to the Libre Foundation, which provides free leadership training to the leaders of NGOs in developing countries. Their mission is: "Bringing leadership development to those who cannot afford it."

It's a mission I completely support, which is why 50 per cent of the profit from sales of this book will be donated to the Libre Foundation.

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**"Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle,  
and the life of the candle will not be shortened."**

**– Buddha**

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# Foreword

It is with great pleasure and profound admiration that I introduce “Your Leadership Toolkit,” a remarkable book that stands as a testament to the transformative power of the Amsterdam Leadership Program (ALP), a cornerstone of our esteemed Amsterdam MBA program. As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of this course, we reflect on the extraordinary journey led by its visionary designer, Joris Nuijten, whose dedication and innovative spirit have left a significant mark on our institution, our students and the broader community of leaders in Amsterdam and beyond.

Over the past decade, the Amsterdam Leadership Program has consistently been highlighted by our students as the most influential and inspiring course within the entire MBA curriculum. This feedback is not merely a testament to the course content, but also a tribute to

Joris' exceptional ability to connect with students, understand their aspirations and equip them with the tools necessary to navigate the complexities of leadership in the modern world. Joris' approach to leadership education is not confined to traditional paradigms; instead, it embraces a holistic, inclusive and adaptive methodology that resonates deeply with our diverse student body.

The modular design of "Your Leadership Toolkit" epitomises the flexibility and accessibility that have become core characteristics of the Amsterdam Leadership Program. Readers are not required to read the book cover to cover; instead, they can tailor their journey through the book according to their specific needs and interests. This approach empowers individuals to focus on the areas closely related to their personal and professional development, making the learning process both efficient and impactful.

A particularly innovative feature of this book is the self-assessment test provided in the introduction. This tool allows readers to evaluate their current leadership skills and identify the chapters that will be most beneficial to their personal growth. By offering this personalised roadmap, the book ensures that each reader can maximise their learning experience, regardless of their starting point or prior knowledge.

"Your Leadership Toolkit" is written for anyone with a desire to learn and grow, irrespective of their current leadership role. Whether you are leading a team, aspiring to take on more responsibility, or simply seeking to

## Foreword

enhance your personal effectiveness, this book provides valuable insights and practical strategies that can be applied in a wide range of contexts. Joris' inclusive approach recognises that leadership is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour, but a personal journey that varies greatly from one individual to another.

One of the most compelling aspects of this book is its commitment to offering a diverse array of resources rather than prescribing a singular path to effective leadership. Readers are encouraged to explore the wide range of tools, techniques and perspectives presented in the book, and to select those that resonate most with their unique style and circumstances. This emphasis on personalisation and choice is a reflection of Joris' belief in the power of self-directed learning and individual agency.

Moreover, "Your Leadership Toolkit" is designed not just as a book to read, but as a book to do. Each chapter concludes with practical exercises and reflection questions, inviting readers to actively engage with the material and apply their learnings in real-time. This hands-on approach ensures that the insights gained from the book are not merely theoretical, but are translated into concrete actions that can drive meaningful change and development. One of the most fundamental principles of effective learning in any MBA program.

Personally, I am deeply grateful to Joris for his unwavering commitment to excellence and innovation. His contributions to our program extend far beyond the classroom; they encompass a spirit of collaboration, a

## Your Leadership Toolkit

collegial mindset and a relentless pursuit of improvement. Joris' loyalty and dedication to continuously refining and enhancing the Amsterdam Leadership Program have made it a cornerstone of our curriculum and a source of immense pride for our institution.

In closing, I invite you to delve into "Your Leadership Toolkit" with an open mind and a willingness to explore new possibilities. May this book inspire you, challenge you and equip you with the tools to become the leader you aspire to be. On behalf of the entire Amsterdam MBA community, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Joris for his extraordinary contributions and to you, the reader, for embarking on this journey of leadership and growth.

Sincerely,

**Sebastian Kortmann,**

Director of the Amsterdam MBA (Triple Crown accredited),  
part of University of Amsterdam

# Preface

When we are children, we follow our hearts naturally. We do what we want to do in the moment, without much thought of the long-term future or the implications of our decisions. Of course, as we get older, not only do our brains develop, but others around us also influence our behaviour and in some cases our life choices.

One of the hardest questions to answer is often, “What do I want to do with my life?”, but I think our childhood can be a good place to look for inspiration if we are struggling for an answer to this question.

You’ll hear a little later about a pivotal moment in my life when I realised what I wanted to do – become a leadership coach – and how I made the shift from project manager to leadership coach. However, when I look back on my life, I realise that the clues to my path were there all along, and

had I known how to evaluate my behaviour and passions when I was younger, I may have identified my true calling in life a bit earlier.

When I was about seven or eight, like many young boys, I used to play soccer with my friends and neighbours. I really enjoyed playing, although I was not the best player on the pitch. At some point, and I don't remember the reason why, I came up with the idea of giving out soccer diplomas. I created diplomas at different levels, and for each one there was a list of things you had to do. There was a soccer diploma A, B, C... all the way up to Master level.

The idea of these diplomas really caught on with the other kids, and all of a sudden they were practising more and more so that they could advance to the next level. When I think back to my soccer diploma idea, and compare it to what I do now in leadership development and coaching, I feel as though the two are very similar. I don't consider myself a "leadership expert", just as I didn't consider myself a "soccer expert" when I was eight years old.

Whether through the diplomas I gave out on our scruffy soccer pitch as a child, or through the exercises and reflections I encourage my clients to undertake now, I see myself as someone who is helping others become just a little bit better in a way that's important to them. What I am, and what I clearly always have been, is a catalyst for growth. Growth, not defined by me, but by the people I work with.

## Preface

It took me years to make this connection, and it's shown me that we all have that inner voice that knows what we are truly passionate about and what we really want – the key is to pause for long enough to hear it, and then to act on what it tells us.

What is your story, and what can you learn from it?

# Introduction

Do you want to develop yourself and personally grow? Would you like to get closer to your personal values and make more conscious choices? Would you benefit from connecting with others in a more meaningful way? Would you like to explore how to have a more meaningful impact on the world around you?

If your answer to one or more of these questions is yes, then this is the right book for you.

We are facing challenging times across multiple facets. Leading ourselves has become difficult as we navigate the overwhelming influx of information and the constant need to adapt to new skills and knowledge. Leading together and working with others is complicated by the diversity of perspectives and the need for empathetic communication in increasingly polarised environments.

## Introduction

And leading change is particularly daunting as we face unprecedented global issues like climate change, and socio-economic inequalities, which require innovative solutions and collaborative efforts across diverse stakeholders to drive sustainable progress.

This book explores leadership through these three dimensions: leading self, leading together, and leading change. These three dimensions are relevant to you – regardless of what work situation you find yourself in, whether or not you lead a team, or where you are in your career. Its contents are based on a wide range of resources, including concepts from neuroscience, positive psychology, organisational behaviour and systems thinking.

Much of the content within these chapters is not new or groundbreaking – in fact it is mostly a compilation of the content contained in the Amsterdam Leadership Programme, a leadership class I deliver to MBA students at Amsterdam Business School, along with concepts I have encountered through my 25+ years working as a leadership coach in corporate environments around the world. It is written in a very practical way, so that you can apply what you learn straightaway.

I haven't always been a leadership coach. I studied engineering, and worked in various engineering and business planning roles in my early career. However, I never felt fully aligned to these jobs – in truth I didn't even realise it was possible to have a job that felt so authentically **me**. It was only when I hit a difficult patch in my career, which I'll talk

about in much greater detail in Chapter 1, that I started exploring other career options.

This exploration has led me here. I am thankful every day that I found my way to the path I'm on, because I get to be myself every day at work, and most of the time I don't even feel as though what I do is "work". I'm a firm believer that we all have something unique to bring to the world, but I'm also aware that for many of us it remains hidden behind the layers that are added to our lives and personas – through what our families tell us, through our education, and through what society conditions us to believe. Many of us have lost touch with who we really are and what unique gifts we have to offer.

As Howard Thurman, an American author, philosopher and civil rights leader who lived in the last century, so eloquently put it, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

We all live our lives full of challenges and distractions. Most of us take little time, if any, to reflect, pause and learn from our experiences. And many of us are not fully engaged in the work that we do. But if more of us can become fully engaged and find our way to roles that align with our values and purpose, we can change the world for the better. We can lead from the front, if you will.

## **The truth about leadership**

There are three main leadership myths that might be useful to address before we dive in. These are the same myths that I talk to my MBA students about, and they are pervasive around the world. The first is that learning around the concept of leadership is only relevant for those leading teams. This could not be further from the truth. Leadership is relevant to all of us. We all need to manage our time, and prioritise our tasks, to allow us to engage effectively with other people, no matter our role in life. We are on a journey to lead ourselves towards a more fulfilling life, and towards authenticity.

So, the first message to you is this: it doesn't matter what stage of your career you are at, or whether you lead a team or not. This book is for you. All of us can benefit from becoming more aware about who we are and what we find important. In my experience, this is particularly helpful for engaging with others.

The second leadership myth is that there is a definitive set of steps that you can follow to become an effective leader. I believe there are an infinite number of ways to be an effective leader, but the one thing they have in common is that they all require us to become our best selves. We are all unique and, therefore, the journeys ahead of each of us will look different. So, we have to be careful not to compare ourselves with others, or compare ourselves and our behaviours against some perceived yardstick of "best leadership practice".

Instead, what this book offers is a series of different lenses through which you can view yourself and your own leadership style to help you on your journey.

This is not a book of answers. This is a book of questions – questions that may help you uncover the great leader within you. The truth is that you probably already have the answers you seek. Hopefully through the questions posed here you can make progress in unlocking them.

The third myth is that some people seem to think that simply reading books about leadership will make them better leaders. I'm sorry to say that unless you take action based on what you read, nothing will change. As you read this book, you'll notice many points for reflection and a number of exercises for you to complete. You are invited to take the time to use these tools to help you take the cognitive information, and turn it into action that can have an impact on you and others. The practical nature of this book is one of the things that sets it apart from many others in the leadership space, so please use this to your advantage and act, as well as learn.

## **Leadership as a life skill**

In my years working as a leadership consultant, and having spent thousands of hours coaching senior leaders and teams across many organisations, what I've realised is that leadership is a series of vital life skills that aren't taught in any meaningful way when we are at school or even university. Much of what is discussed in the following

## Introduction

chapters is designed to help redress that balance. These are skills that will not only benefit you in your career and workplace, but also in your personal relationships and other interactions within your life.

At the same time, you are invited to practise self-compassion as you read. It may at times seem as though this book is asking you to do a lot. In my experience, changing our behaviour, certainly in the beginning, is often far from easy. So, be kind to yourself. If you start trying to change something and it doesn't quite work, or you revert to old habits, then perhaps this isn't the right time for you to make that particular change.

My invitation to you through this book is not to rush to complete all the exercises as quickly as possible, but to merely find pockets of time during your days and weeks to reflect on some of what is shared in the coming pages. You might find you have a quiet moment on a holiday when you can dip into one of these chapters; or maybe a cancelled meeting will leave you with a bit of space in your schedule to read a few pages.

You don't need to read this book in a linear fashion – you can dip in and out of it as you choose, and you can read the chapters in any order you choose. At the end of the Introduction, there is a self-assessment tool you can use to work out where your focus might be best placed initially, and you can use that to navigate your way through this book.

## Three pillars of leadership

As already mentioned, this book is divided into three parts: Leading Self, Leading Together and Leading Change, inspired by Martin Buber's seminal work,<sup>2</sup> and Daniel Goleman's work around focus.<sup>3</sup> Each of these can be connected back to a key theme.

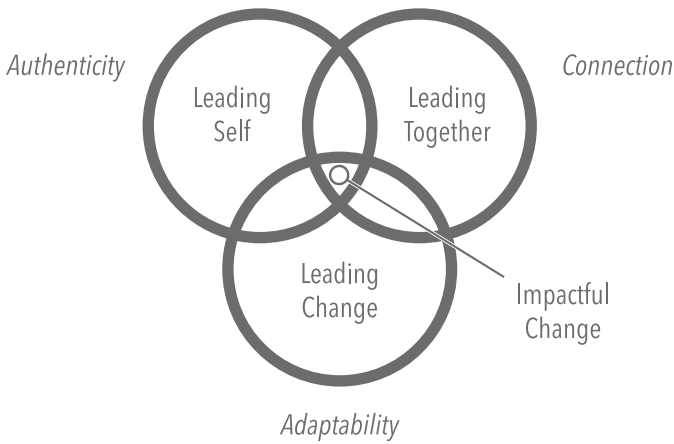
1. Leading Self – Authenticity: The journey begins within. Raise your self-awareness, understand what drives you, and develop the right mindset and habits.
2. Leading Together – Connection: Discover how to motivate and collaborate effectively.
3. Leading Change – Adaptability: Delve into strategies for navigating change, overcoming resistance, and driving meaningful transformation within organisations and communities.

---

2 Buber, M. (1958). *I and Thou* (R. G. Smith, Trans.). Charles Scribner's Sons. (Original work published 1923)

3 Goleman, D. (2013). *Focus: The hidden driver of excellence*. HarperCollins.

## Introduction



The three pillars of leadership

However, the real value lies not in any of these three areas separately, but instead in the sweet spot where the three areas meet. These three areas of leadership are inextricably linked – we will lead others more effectively when we can better lead ourselves, and mastering both of these elements is crucial if we want to lead impactful change. In my experience, the start of any leadership journey is within us – having the humility and the vulnerability to acknowledge that better understanding ourselves is the first step towards better relating to others, and enabling change.

So, let's begin with a story which, I believe, explains the importance of all three of those areas of leadership at a high level.

## Learnings from a camel farm

It starts in a hot and arid desert, on a camel farm in Qatar...

There's a young boy, about seven or eight years old, leaning over a well. He's hauling up a bucket of water. As the bucket reaches the edge of the well, he pulls it towards him, tipping it slightly and spilling a little. The water spreads like a dark stain on the dusty sand at his feet, but the splashes that reach his toes are a welcome relief from the heat of the afternoon and he watches as the wet patch on the ground contracts before his eyes in the heat of the sun.

He takes hold of the handle of the bucket in both hands and lifts it up, carrying it a short distance to a trough and pouring it in. Then he makes another trip, and another. The camels for whom he's collecting this water don't seem bothered. They stand, lazily chewing in the afternoon sun. One is lying down, its legs folded beneath its humped body. They don't offer much in the way of entertainment to the small boy ferrying water to them.

The boy works until the sun begins to dip and dusk starts to creep across the land, bringing with it a welcome drop in temperature. After many trips between the well and the camel pen, the boy returns to his house, where he eats with his family.

When he is at school the next day, he hears his friends talking about something called a cartoon, **did they mean carton, he wonders? And a mouse called Mickey?** Never

having spent any time playing with his friends, he can't even imagine what they mean, so he just nods and stays quiet as they chatter around him. It feels like a different world to him, one where he does not fit in. When school ends for the day, instead of staying to play games with his friends, he says goodbye to them and returns to the camel farm, where he once again ferries water from the well to the troughs for the nonchalant camels.

For years, the boy didn't think that his life was anything other than ordinary. It wasn't until he was an adult who had entered the workplace, that he realised how much of his childhood he had missed out on by having to work in the family business from such a young age.

This is a story that one of my clients, who I'll call Ali, told me during our first face-to-face meeting. I'd been brought in to work with him and his team to help improve their leadership, accountability and results. Their internal employee surveys showed that there was a low level of trust within the team. We had scheduled a one-hour meeting to prepare for a workshop with his leadership team the next day. Initially we talked mainly about the business and strategy. I was genuinely curious, trying to understand and appreciate his many challenges, while also getting to know him as a human being.

Our meeting overran and he seemed to value the conversation, inviting me to join him for lunch in a nearby restaurant. He invited me to taste various local delicacies, and drink the sweet karak tea. He continued talking, and towards the end of the lunch, he started to share his

personal story of his childhood. As Ali opened up, I was genuinely touched by what I heard. Moreover, I could immediately understand why he had adopted a more “command and control” approach to leadership. That was the style that he was used to while growing up. When he’d finished talking about growing up on the camel farm, I asked, “Does your team know about this?”

“No, and I can’t share this with them. In my culture, here in the Middle East, that would be a sign of weakness,” he replied.

I acknowledged his perspective, but added that I viewed this story as a show of strength rather than weakness. We moved onto discussing other things, and I didn’t think a great deal more about the camel farm, until the following day.

The whole team had gathered in Doha for our first face-to-face session. They came from all over the world – the Middle East, the USA, the UK, India. When I met Ali in the morning and asked how he was, he told me he hadn’t slept well. “I’ve been reflecting a lot and I’d like to share some of my story with my team today,” he told me.

I readily agreed and reassured him that I would manage our time to keep us on track, but he should feel free to tell as much of his story as he’d like to. Our initial plan was to focus on the team’s business plan, vision and strategy. As everyone filed into the air conditioned meeting room, I could feel the wariness among the team. There was a sense of resistance and almost nervous tension.

Once everyone was seated, Ali stood up and started talking. He shared his story about growing up on a camel farm, going into even more detail than he had with me the day before. As he talked, I could feel the energy in the room changing. People were sitting up and taking notice, instead of slouching. They were visibly more engaged and they all seemed surprised by Ali's openness.

When he finished talking, someone else spoke. "I'd like to share something about myself if I may?" Ali nodded and sat down. What followed was a session where others around the table shared something about themselves. At this point I called a break, but as everyone left the room, it was clear there was a new bond forming between them. They were smiling and chatting more freely.

After our break, we regrouped and focused on the business plan and strategy – and that whole session flew by much more easily because people had lowered their guards. When Ali and I debriefed at the end of the day, he couldn't believe the change in the team. "I'm truly touched by what's happening now in my team," he said, "Thank you." I pointed out that it was his story of the camel farm that brought everyone together.

Ali and I stayed in touch and he told me one day – a few months after the initial meeting – that he had taken his whole team to his parents' camel farm, where they had sat around a campfire, shared more stories with one another and bonded even further as a leadership team.

This exemplifies the three elements of leading self, leading together and leading change. Leadership starts by leading and managing yourself. By being willing to be your **authentic** self and to be vulnerable with others – just as Ali was when he talked about his childhood – you can connect with others at a deeper level, and get the best out of your team.

Prior to this session, Ali had always had a reputation for being very results driven. He was known for being strong and pushy, and he rarely shared anything about his personal life. So when he not only shared something personal, but actually something quite vulnerable, his team saw another, more human side to him, which made them respect him more.

Understanding Ali's early experiences helped them to see that he was just doing the best he could, in the best way he knew how. They were able to appreciate his efforts much more as a result. They also then felt safe to open up to one another, creating a strong **connection** within the team.

When you unlock a team's potential in this way, you can then lead change because when people feel psychologically safe and connected to those around them, they are more **adaptable** and nimble. Ali's team certainly had a significant impact on the business in the years that followed and while that wasn't all down to him opening up and sharing his story, that felt like the catalyst that changed his team's culture.

## **Stories that shape us**

This is a pattern I've seen repeated many times with the leaders I've worked with in my career, and particularly among the ones who are most successful – often there are significant life experiences that have shaped them and made them who they are.

We can't underestimate the impact our early years have on who we ultimately become. This is one of the reasons why it's so valuable and powerful to give leaders the space and time to reflect on their own stories, and how those have shaped them into the leaders they are today.

The importance of self-reflection as a leader is something we'll talk more about in Part 1. But in essence, as leaders it's really important that we appreciate our full selves, with all the highlights and the lowlights we've experienced. It doesn't help us, or the people we lead, if we ignore parts of ourselves.

It can be easy to forget that leadership starts with ourselves. Very often when people talk about leadership in general, they jump into topics like how to delegate and how to motivate others, and while these things are crucial, they forget this very important first step – leading ourselves. This involves raising self-awareness, truly understanding yourself, and being able to acknowledge your strengths as well as your weaknesses and blind spots.

This means the better you get to know yourself, the less likely you are to inadvertently trigger other people. When

you are self-aware and bring your whole self to work, you encourage others to do the same and can create a culture of openness and honesty. This can result in really effective leadership, where everyone can bring their whole selves to work and no one feels as though there are parts of themselves that they need to hide.

This transitions into leading together and working with others because sharing parts of yourself, like Ali did with his team, helps create a culture in which everyone can be truly authentic. This leads to connection, collaboration and authenticity within a team.

When you are leading yourself and leading together in this way, you are able to lead change and transformation in any organisation. I've seen this many times, not just with Ali's team, but with many others I've worked with over the years. It's only once people unlock those two levels of leadership that they are able to step into leading change.

At the same time, every individual and every leadership journey is unique, so what worked in Ali's example may not work for others. It is our challenge to identify what might help in our specific journey, and hopefully the modular structure of this book will assist you with this.

Throughout the different chapters, I have tried to cover the main topics that are of relevance for each of the three parts. The MECE (Mutually Exclusive, Collectively Exhaustive) concept is often used in consulting and is used to describe a method of structuring information

and analysis, for example as described in Minto's work.<sup>4</sup> Despite my best efforts, this book does not completely meet these requirements. The chapters are not mutually exclusive – you will notice that there is a lot of overlap in places, but you'll also find references to supporting content to make it easier for you to connect the dots. The chapters are also not collectively exhaustive – there are many relevant topics which have not been covered in depth. However, you will find useful references included throughout to help you explore any of the topics that particularly interest you, in more depth.

So, I invite you to see this book as the starting book of your journey, and hopefully you can find ways to continue and deepen that journey after you have finished reading.

### **Where to start**

As I mentioned, this book is written in such a way that each chapter can be read on its own and provide you with valuable insights. For some readers, it might be beneficial to kick off with Part 1 – working towards self-mastery – before engaging with Parts 2 and 3. For others, Part 2 might be the best place to begin, using exercises from Part 1 to support you on your journey. Your journey through this book can be whatever you want to make it.

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4 Minto B., 1987, *The Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing and Thinking*, Pearson Education

## Your Leadership Toolkit

If you're not sure where best to begin, give yourself a score from 1 to 5 in response to the following statements, where 1 means you strongly disagree, while 5 means you strongly agree. Any that you answer with a score of 3 or less will lead you to the chapters that are likely to benefit you the most at this time.

Of course, if you would like to read the book cover to cover, please jump in!









