Anyone can learn to be a great leader. This book will show you how.

Its clear focus on practical, straightforward advice and guidance, delivered with refreshing honesty and humour, will make sure you quickly understand and master all the core skills you’ll need to succeed.

Based on original research into some of the world’s best organisations, How to Lead cuts right through all the myths and mysteries to get straight to the heart of what it really takes to motivate, inspire and deliver results.

‘A rare gem of a book. Highly recommended’
John Hempsey, CEO, Hempsey Partners

‘Wonderfully clear, engaging, detailed and practical’
Professor Nigel Nicholson, London Business School

A unique and brilliant combination of authoritative guidance and stimulating and entertaining advice, How to Lead helps you resolve some common challenges that every leader will face:

- Why should anyone want to follow you as a leader?
- How to manage boring, narcissistic leaders above you
- How to be seen as a leader at all levels of the organisation
- How to be more successful by doing less

How to Lead includes free access to checklists on handy leadership topics such as driving performance, managing time, setting and controlling budgets, dealing with crises and delegating. These indispensible guides to those leadership skills all leaders must have are also available at: www.pearson-books.com/howtolead

‘Useful for anyone keen to develop leadership skills at whatever level’
David Gregson, Chairman, Phoenix Equity Partners

‘…has the ability to make everyone pause, ponder and think on’
Nick Kitchen, VP HR, Unilever FoodSolutions

Anyone can learn to be a great leader. This book will show you how.
How to Lead
How to Lead

3rd edition

Jo Owen
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Creating this book has been a personal journey of discovery, in the course of which I have met many old and new guides to help me along the way. I would not have even started the journey without the inspiration of the staff and participants of Teach First: if they are the leaders of the future, our future is in good hands. Since its creation nine years ago, Teach First has become one of the top five graduate recruiters in the UK: a great example of leadership in action. I hope this book helps all the Teach First participants on their journeys towards leadership. I would not have had the courage to start the book without the gentle support of my agent, Frances Kelly, and of Richard Stagg and Caroline Jordan of Pearson.

In the course of researching How to Lead I have drawn on the time and support of many people. A vast array of staff and participants at Teach First, Future Leaders and Teaching Leaders have been a live laboratory for testing the ideas in How to Lead. I am also hugely grateful to the several thousand people whom I have interviewed on video or talked to informally, or who have replied to questionnaires. Readers of the last two editions have pitched in with practical ideas, challenging questions and personal experiences. My only regret is that I cannot include all the material which I have been offered. Finally, my thanks go to the 100-plus organisations which I have worked with over the years. I certainly have learned much from them: I hope they got something in return.

Leaders, like authors, learn to take responsibility. So blame for the failings of the book lie with me, not with the wonderful support I have received from so many current and future leaders.
The reaction to the first two editions of *How to Lead* showed great hunger for discovering about leadership as it is for mortals. The basic idea of this book is that anyone can learn to lead, and that everyone can learn to lead better. Leadership is like sport or music: we may not be global megastars, but we can all improve with practice and guidance. We can at least be the best of who we are.

The third edition follows the previous two with a relentless focus on the practical skills of leadership. This edition adds three more practical elements to the first two editions, in response to the feedback I have received from readers over the years.

First, this edition shows how you can manage your leadership career better by finding the right context. This is essential for all leaders. The same leader can flourish or flounder depending on whether they have the right context for using their unique, signature strengths.

Second, this edition explores how leadership varies across public, private and voluntary sectors. Traditionally, most leadership books are based on private sector examples. This is massive myopia. Having set up four national charities, I am acutely aware of the challenges that voluntary sector leaders face. They have minimal resources compared to the private sector: that does not make their task easier. And public sector leadership is not easy street either: huge constraints and intense scrutiny are just a couple of the challenges they face. Each sector can learn from the others. Having said that, the basics of leadership remain the same across all sectors: set

About the third edition
a direction, motivate people, be decisive, demonstrate honesty and integrity. The principles of leadership are universal, but how you apply them is unique to your context.

Third, I have responded to reader requests to summarise key points in simple checklists which you can copy, take away or hand out to colleagues. You will find 30 of these checklists split between this edition of How to Lead and its sister book, How to Manage (third edition). These cover all the topics which leaders have to master, including: driving performance, managing time, setting and controlling budgets, dealing with crises and delegating. And to make it even easier for you to use the checklists, they’re available to download from the book’s companion website at www.pearson-books.com/howtolead

As with the first two editions, you cannot read this book and finish it as a leader. But it will help you put structure on the random walk of experience; it will help you make sense of the nonsense around you; it will help you accelerate your learning; and it can be your private coach on your road to leadership.
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Leadership is too often shrouded in mystery. To become leaders we are urged to become a combination of Genghis Khan, Nelson Mandela, Machiavelli and Ghandi. A few people feel that they are already that good. The rest of us feel slightly small when measured against such giants.

The mystery deepens when you try to define what makes a good leader in practice. We can all recognise a good leader in our daily lives. But no leader seems to conform to a single template.

Some academics and consultants decided to solve the mystery of leadership. They had time on their hands – they were on safari. By way of a warm-up exercise they decided to design the perfect predator. Each took responsibility for one element of the predator. The result was a beast with the legs of a cheetah, the jaws of a crocodile, the hide of a rhino, the neck of a giraffe, the ears of an elephant, the tail of a scorpion and the attitude of a hippo. The beast promptly collapsed under the weight of its own improbability.

Undeterred, they turned their attention to designing the perfect leader. Their perfect leader looked like this:

- creative and disciplined
- visionary and detailed
- motivational and commanding
- directing and empowering
- ambitious and humble
reliable and risk taking
intuitive and logical
intellectual and emotional
coaching and controlling.

This leader also collapsed under the weight of overwhelming improbability.

The good news is that we do not have to be perfect to be a leader. We have to fit the situation. The polar bear is the perfect predator in the Arctic but would be useless in Papua New Guinea. Winston Churchill had to endure what he called his ‘wilderness years’ in peacetime. He just happened to be perfect as a wartime leader. The same leader enjoyed different outcomes in different situations.

The good news is that we do not have to be perfect to be a leader.

How to Lead is about becoming an effective leader, not the perfect leader.

In search of the pixie dust of leadership

There has been a long search for the alchemy of leadership: we all want to find the elusive pixie dust that we can sprinkle on ourselves to turn us into glittering leaders.

The research for this book sometimes felt like a search for the pixie dust of leadership. Over 1,000 individuals helped by identifying what they saw as effective leadership at all levels of their organisations. In addition, over 30 CEO-level individuals in the public, private and voluntary sectors in both small and large organisations gave in-depth interviews. If anyone knows about the pixie dust, they should. I also reviewed 30 years’ experience of working with over 100 of the world’s best, and one or two of the world’s worst, organisations to see what patterns of leadership emerged. Over the past seven years I have even worked with some traditional tribal groups from Mali to Mongolia and the Arctic to Australia by way of Papua
New Guinea to see how they are led. Closer to home, I led a study for Oxford University of Anglo-French leadership to discover how far the world of the leader changes when you cross the Channel.

The bad news is that there is no pixie dust. Or if there is, they are hiding it very well.

But there is plenty of good news:

- Everyone can be a leader. The leaders we talked to came in all sorts of flavours and styles and all had different success formulas.
- You can load the dice in your favour. There are some things that all leaders do well. It does not guarantee success, but it does make success more likely.
You can learn to be a leader. You do not have to be someone else: you do not have to become Napoleon or Mother Teresa. You simply have to be the best of who you are.

This book shows how you can acquire the consistent characteristics of effective leadership and how you can adapt them to your own style.

**Unravelling the mysteries of leadership**

Leadership is inundated by small words with big meanings like *vision* and *values* and *integrity*. It is a subject which suffers from an extraordinary amount of hype and nonsense. In my exploration of leadership the mysteries began to melt away. The leaders gave reassuringly practical answers for some common questions about leadership:

- Can you learn to be a leader?
- What is this vision thing?
- Do values have any value in reality?
- How do leaders with apparent weaknesses succeed?
- Why do some great people fail as leaders?
- What do leaders look for in their followers?
- What makes a good leader?
- Is a leader just the person at the top?
- How do you handle conflict and crises?

What follows is not a theory of leadership. It is the collected wisdom of people who are leading at all levels in different types of organisation. The result is a book which can act as your coach to being an effective leader at any level of any organisation.
In search of any leadership

The search for leadership started with an easy question: what is leadership? This promptly lost everyone in a jungle of conflicting views expressed both forcibly and persuasively. Everyone recognises a good leader when they see one, but no one agrees on a common definition.

One dead end was the belief that leadership is related to seniority. Leadership is not about position: it is about what you do and how you behave. So it follows that:

- The person at the top of the organisation may be in a leadership position, but they may not be leading. They may be careful stewards of a legacy organisation.
- Leaders can exist at nearly all levels of the organisation.
- Leaders need followers. You may be smarter than Einstein, but if no one is following you, you cannot be a leader.

At this point it made sense to start looking for the skills and behaviours that effective leaders have. I made a surprising discovery. Many leaders not only lack some basic management skills, they know they lack those skills. Being good at writing memos, having accounting acumen, strategic insight or deep technical expertise is useful, but not essential. Most leaders rated intelligence as a low priority for leadership. Either they were telling the truth or they were demonstrating the humility of great leaders. Think of some familiar political or business leaders; it is clear that they are not necessarily the brightest or the best or the most competent or the most skilled in every area. Many of the world’s top entrepreneurs and wealthiest people, like Bill Gates, Mukesh Ambani, Eike Batista, Li Ka-Shing and Roman Abramovich, are MBA-free zones. Between them, they have amassed $140 billion of personal wealth and zero university degrees. You do not need formal qualifications to be a successful leader.
By now I was lost in the leadership jungle. Skills seemed to be a dead end; styles of leadership could take us in nearly any direction.

It was time to look more closely at behaviours of leaders. Suddenly, a way forward opened up. People know what behaviours they expect from the leaders of their organisation. The key behaviours expected of a leader at the top are:

- ability to motivate others
- vision
- honesty and integrity
- decisiveness
- ability to handle crises.

It is worth reflecting for a moment on what is not on the list: management skills, reliability, intelligence, ambition, attention to detail, planning and organisation all failed to register. As this leadership journey unfolds, we will explore what these behaviours really mean and what we can do to demonstrate these behaviours effectively.

It was now tempting to declare victory. But the list did not look right. What we expect of top leaders is not necessarily the same as what we expect of emerging leaders. The 1,000 volunteers who helped in the search for leadership confirmed this suspicion. The behaviours they value in emerging leaders are totally different from the behaviours they expect in senior leaders, as shown in the list below.

**Expected behaviours of recent graduates and senior management**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recent graduate</th>
<th>Senior manager</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Ability to motivate others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>Vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactivity</td>
<td>Honesty and integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Decisiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambition</td>
<td>Ability to handle crises</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Teach First Survey Results, Monitor Group analysis)
There is one glaring omission from the list above. Performance. It does not get a mention. In working with leaders it is clear that they are, normally, performance obsessed. But they do not talk about it as a leadership quality: they assume that if you have the right qualities, then good performance will flow naturally from those qualities.

By now, the leadership search was in danger of becoming lost in a swamp of words and ideas. Life is already complicated enough without drowning in a swamp of leadership ideas. Fortunately, a simple map slowly began to emerge out of the swamp. All the grand words and ideas came down to a few simple principles which apply to leaders at all levels. For the sake of alliteration and simplicity, I have called them the three-and-a-half Ps of leadership.

Three of the Ps dropped out of our research readily. Performance is the odd one out. If I was being intellectually rigorous, it would have no place in the leadership framework because only one of the selected leaders really focused on performance. Most leaders saw performance as a symptom, not a cause, of good leadership. For this reason, performance earns no more than half a P in the leadership framework.

These words can mean more or less anything to anyone. So the next task was to create a more detailed picture of what lay behind these grand words and convert it into something practical that all leaders can use in their daily lives.
Creating the leadership map

Slowly, the map of the leadership journey started to unfold. Expectations of leaders across all types of organisation were clear. But expectations of leaders at different levels of each organisation varied. The rules of success and survival varied. This helps explain why people often find themselves over-promoted. The rules they followed at one level do not work at the next higher level of the organisation. Altitude sickness is a real challenge in leadership terms: you can succeed at one level and then simply find the challenge too great at a higher level where the rules of success have changed out of all recognition.

Too much work on leadership focuses on what happens at the top of an organisation. This is a significant issue. Rules which work at the top of the organisation are not relevant to someone setting out on the leadership journey. An organisation full of Ghengis Khan wannabes is unlikely to be a happy place. It is no good mapping only the destination. We all need a map for the journey to the destination as well.

Managing the transition from one level of leadership to another is always a challenge. Failure rates are high even at the highest level of the organisation. The career expectancy of a FTSE-100 CEO is now under five years. It pays to know how the rules of success and survival vary by level.

Eventually, a map of what good leadership looks like at each level of the organisation emerged.

Much of what you can read in the effective leadership behaviours map below may seem obvious. But before reading on, try two exercises. In the first exercise, think of some people whom you rate as effective leaders at different levels of your organisation and see how well they display the characteristics listed. There will certainly
be some differences: as long as leaders are human there will be variation. But the chances are that, if they are good, they will show many of the characteristics to a greater degree than their peers.

### Effective leadership behaviours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective leadership</th>
<th>Foundations of leadership: emerging leaders</th>
<th>Practice of leadership: leading from the middle</th>
<th>Mastering leadership: leading from the top</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on people</td>
<td>Decentres self, manages up, supports others.</td>
<td>Builds commitment, good influencer.</td>
<td>Forms, aligns, motivates a leadership team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Builds networks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being positive</td>
<td>Has drive, ambition; is self-aware, adaptable.</td>
<td>Embraces ambiguity as opportunity, not risk. Manages conflict well.</td>
<td>Communicates a clear vision; handles crises well; focuses on must-win battles. Decisive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finds solutions, not problems. Volunteers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being professional</td>
<td>Learns the business, learns leadership. Loyal. Reliable.</td>
<td>Masters core skills, sees beyond own silo.</td>
<td>Shows honesty, integrity; role model for core values.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is one catch in the leadership map. When you make the transition from one level of leadership to another, the rules of the game do not change completely. You cannot substitute one set of rules for another. Instead, the rules of success are additive: you have to do all the things you did at the previous level, and then add the new rules for the new level. The leadership hurdle rises with each level of the organisation.

In practice, this means that the early years of the leadership career are vital. The habits formed then will not go away. Learn the wrong habits early on, and they become very difficult to kick.
Now try looking through the other end of the telescope at some less effective managers in your organisation. Reflect on why they are less effective. There are some consistent traps that leaders fall into at every level of the organisation. These are not problems of gross incompetence, although those problems do exist occasionally; they are traps that decent managers easily fall into. The result is that they stay as managers and never emerge as leaders.

**Ineffective leadership behaviours**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ineffective leadership</th>
<th>Foundations of leadership: emerging leaders</th>
<th>Practice of leadership: leading from the middle</th>
<th>Mastering leadership: leading from the top</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on people</td>
<td>Egocentric; lives in rational world, no EQ (emotional quotient) or political awareness.</td>
<td>Expertise focus, not people focus; naïve about networks and politics.</td>
<td>Hires weak clones; threatened by talent. Delegates poorly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being positive</td>
<td>Can't do; problem focused; delegates upwards.</td>
<td>Retreats into comfort zone of authority, not responsibility.</td>
<td>Lack of stretch for self or the organisation; manages a legacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being professional</td>
<td>One of the lads or lasses.</td>
<td>Too political, loses trust. Leader in the locker room.</td>
<td>Rides the gravy train of status and entitlement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These descriptions of effective and ineffective leaders should come as no surprise. But one more step is needed to create a useful map of our leadership journey. It is not helpful to tell people that leaders must be inspirational, or heroic, or charismatic. Most of us do not fill that mould and never will. You cannot teach or learn charisma easily. More to the point, most of the leaders felt that charisma and heroism were exactly the wrong style of leadership. Good leaders do not pretend to know it all and they do not try to do everything themselves. Leadership, for them, is a team sport. They all know they have weaknesses; their teams balance their own strengths and weaknesses.
The nature of leadership

1   Everyone can learn to lead, and to lead better
    You do not have to be born to lead. Leadership is based on skills which everyone can and should learn. You can learn from good and bad role models and experience. Never stop learning.

2   No leader is perfect
    No leader gets ticks in all the boxes. Do not strive for perfection; strive for improvement and build on your strengths.

3   You can lead at any level
    Leadership is about performance, not position. If you take people where they would not have gone by themselves, you are leading.

4   Build on your strengths
    All leaders have a unique signature strength which lets them succeed in the right context. Build on your strengths; work around weaknesses.

5   Leadership is a team sport
    Do not try to be the lone hero. Work with others who have strengths that are different from yours and will compensate for your gaps.

6   Make a difference
    Do not accept the status quo. Leaders push themselves and others to over-achieve, to go beyond their comfort zone and to develop themselves and their organisation.

7   Find your context
    Leaders who succeed in one context can fail in another; find out where you can use your signature strengths to best advantage if you want to succeed.

8   People and political skills become more important with seniority
    Technical skills are enough to gain promotion at junior levels. The more senior you become, the more you must master the arts of managing people and managing politics.
9 The rules of leadership change at each level of the organisation

Success at one level does not lead to success at the next level. Expectations change – learn those expectations and develop new skills to meet the new expectations.

10 You are responsible

You are responsible for your performance, your career and your feelings.

Instead of focusing on heroism and charisma, the leaders focused on the practical skills which a leader needs. They helped to identify over 40 practical skills, which are different from the technical skills of the job (bookkeeping, legal knowledge, cutting code). They are also different in quality from the way the managers learn the same or similar skills. They are skills which the leader has to start acquiring from the start of their career.

There is plenty of good news in this skills-based approach to leadership. It blows away the mysterious guff about heroic leaders and reduces it to things that ordinary people can aspire to learn. Effective leaders do not even need to learn all the skills. All the leaders recognised that they have weaknesses and are still learning. By having the self-confidence and self-awareness to know their own weaknesses, they can build the right leadership team to help them and they could be open about continuing to learn.

All the leaders were clear that they succeeded by building on their strengths. Everyone has weaknesses – building on weakness is not a recipe for success. Not many Olympic athletes win gold by focusing on their weaknesses. Not many leaders succeed by focusing on their weaknesses either. We do not need to try to be someone else. We simply need to be the best of who we are. We need to build on our strengths and work around our weaknesses.
This book is your guide to the leadership journey. It focuses on the many practical skills which help distinguish effective from less effective leaders. It does not guarantee success, but it will load the dice in your favour.

Learning to lead

There is some debate on whether you can learn to lead, and if so, how. The good news is that everyone can learn to lead to some level of proficiency, just as we can all learn to play a musical instrument or play a sport. We may not land up being the greatest musician, sportsperson or leader, but at least we can be a better one.

The alternative theory, that leaders are born not bred, is terrifying. England tried this theory for roughly 900 years when the monarchy and aristocracy ruled by right of birth. The result was that for 900 years the country was led by murderers, rapists, kleptocrats, madmen, drug runners and the occasional genius who was meant to make up for the rest. Applying the same theory to business does not bode well: most family businesses discover that the saying ‘Clogs to clogs in three generations’ holds true. The first generation makes the money, the second generation spends it and the third is back to where the first generation started.

Believing that leaders are born not bred is fatalistic. You may as well give everyone a DNA test when they start their careers and let that determine their fate. In practice we can help everyone improve their leadership potential. The only question is how. To test this, we asked our leaders how they learned to lead. We let them choose two ways of learning from the following six:

- books
- courses
peers
- bosses (good and bad lessons)
- role models (in and beyond work)
- experience.

Before looking at the answer, you may want to think which two sources of learning have been most important to you. Having tried the same question with thousands of executives around the world, there is a uniform answer. No one claims to have learned mainly from books or courses. This could be bad news for someone who writes books and leads courses. We all learn either from direct experience, or from the experience of others around us. These are the lessons we value most.

The problem with learning from experience is that experience is a random walk. If we are lucky we bump into good experiences, bosses, peers and role models. If we are unlucky we get poor experiences, bosses, peers and role models. We can hope to get lucky with our random walk. But luck is not a strategy and hope is not a method. We need to manage our journey to leadership. And that is where the books and courses help. You cannot start at page 1 of a book and finish at page 250 as a leader. That is not the point of books or courses. They help you make sense of your experiences, help you remove some of the randomness from the random walk of experience and help you accelerate your path to leadership. How to Lead provides you with frameworks to support your learning from experience: it is a structure on which you can build your journey to success.
Chapter 3
Being professional
Professionalism encompasses the core skills and values that define the character and potential of your organisation and you as an individual. It is central to the success of leadership. It means different things at different levels of leadership.

For the leaders at the top of an organisation, professionalism is fundamentally about the values that they display. Some leaders fail this basic test. They get to the top of the organisation and promptly put their snouts in the trough of perks, privilege and pay. The worst ones go to jail, the others simply serve to undermine morale within their organisation and undermine respect for business in the wider community. Other leaders set an example and live the values of the organisation. Professionalism can never be taken for granted.

For the emerging leaders, professionalism has four elements:

1. Learning to learn leadership.
2. Learning the local rules of the game: understanding professionalism in the context of your organisation.
3. Learning some universal lessons of professionalism.
4. Learning business survival etiquette.

These professional capabilities are cumulative: the lessons you learn as an emerging leader have to be carried forward and added to the professional skills which you build by leading in the middle. As the leader at the top, you have to add a final set of professional values to the values and skills that you have picked up on the way to the top.
Let’s start with the good news: it is possible to learn leadership. If you know how to learn leadership, you are well on the way to success.

The bad news is that neither the education system nor corporate training systems will help you. The formal education system teaches people exactly the wrong lessons about leadership, which may help explain why so many successful leaders, like Richard Branson and Bill Gates, dropped out of education prematurely.

The education system teaches you to work in a highly structured environment, where you work largely alone to find a logical answer. Any potential leader who hopes for a structured, predictable environment where there is a logical answer and in which they can work alone is likely to be deeply disappointed.

Corporate training sessions do not help much either. They can, like business schools, do a fine job of transferring a body of knowledge about accounting or operations or finance. But leadership is not about technical knowledge alone. Leadership requires enabling people to achieve things.

Corporate training tends to focus on explicit knowledge: technical skills which can be embodied in books, e-learning and courses. This is the knowledge that the West has focused on with great success. Tacit knowledge is more about know-how than about know-what – it is the elusive knowledge about how to do things well. Much of the Japanese tradition, which has served them well in manufacturing and quality, has been about tacit knowledge. Corporate training which tries to focus on tacit knowledge often subsides into tree hugging, raft building and abseiling. Some people like it, but few leaders develop from it. No leaders we talked to pointed to any training courses as the essence of their success.
In practice, leadership is not about explicit knowledge that goes into books and courses. It is about tacit knowledge; books only help the process of structured observation and discovery that helps leaders find the leadership style which works best for them.

Leaders typically develop their capabilities in three ways:

1. Learning from role models: learning from leaders.
2. Learning from experience: career as a noun and a verb.
3. Learning from structured observation and discovery (sometimes).

**Learning from role models: learning from leaders**

Everyone learns from role models. Within an organisation, your role models are successful peers and, for better or worse, your boss. This learning process can be quite unconscious. David Begg, the head of Tanaka Business School, recalls hearing someone give his own lecture, with his own mannerisms and his own phrases. It was like looking in a mirror. He was, in fact, watching his very first mentor from whom he had unconsciously copied much of his own successful style of lecturing. It is important to find the right role models and to learn the right lessons from them: pick up the wrong habits from the wrong role model early in a career, and it becomes very hard to change course.

As individuals we all create our own leadership DNA; we steal a bit from one leader and a bit more from another leader we admire. Equally, we use a little leadership gene therapy to get rid of unhelpful DNA; seeing a colleague mess up is a very valuable lesson about what not to do. By stealing lots of DNA from lots of sources we land up becoming unique. In turn, other people steal bits of our DNA. Thankfully, we never clone each other completely. In one consulting firm we had a water cooler game of ‘spot the mannerism’: we could identify certain mannerisms that different partners had and we could trace it back to one or two people whom they all admired. Leadership skills are infectious.
As with all infections, we do not realise either that we are infecting anyone or that we are being infected in turn.

For the most part, the process of learning starts out unconsciously. Emerging leaders see some people blow up and do their best to avoid the same fate. They see some bosses do really smart things and will try to incorporate that into how they operate. At an early stage, emerging leaders quickly absorb the rules of success and failure in their chosen organisation. Many find that the rules of the game are not to their liking and will venture off to another organisation in search of a game where they can do better.

Copying role models is particularly useful in conflict, crises and difficult situations. Asking the question, ‘What would X (whom I admire greatly) do in this situation?’ often creates clarity where there was fog and fear. Try it next time you face a challenge.

For many people, learning leadership in this way is a random walk; you bump into good role models and bad ones alike. This puts the emerging leader at the mercy of luck. Get a good boss and role model and you learn all the right habits. Get a poor boss and you get lousy learning which takes a long time to unlearn. There are obvious career management implications here: get the right boss. There are also implications for making learning leadership a more structured and productive exercise. These implications are spelled out below.

Learning from experience: career as a noun and a verb

The second way that leaders learn is from personal experiences, triumphs and disasters. They gain this experience in two different ways.

Leaders who have had a career (noun) build up a deep knowledge of their industry and organisation. Some corporate organisations, like Unilever and GE, actively move their younger talent around the world and around businesses and functions so that they can build the breadth of experience to become effective leaders.
For other leaders, career is a verb which describes how they have moved from one experience to another in different sorts of organisation. In a less structured way than the large corporate organisation, they too have built a breadth of experience which enables them to become leaders.

Whether career is a verb or a noun, existing leaders emphasise the importance of getting the right experience and the right role models early. Taking risks at the start of a career is easier than taking risks later on – a 26-year-old can start over again more easily than a 46-year-old. Many 26-year-olds recover from a false career start by the simple expedient of doing an MBA.

Smart people often fail as leaders because they chose the wrong experience at the start of their careers. The bags of gold being offered by banks and professional services firms are attractive to anyone with student debts. But sitting in front of a screen for three years trading bonds or preparing presentations prepares no one for leadership. Less glamorous careers where you learn to deal with people, not computers, are often a better grounding for future leadership.
Learning from structured observation and discovery

Learning from experience and role models is not hugely attractive to a generation which wants it all and wants it now. Listening to the older generation advising them to settle down for the long haul and wait their turn which may, or may not, come along in 25 years is not inspiring to a 25-year-old.

You have two ways of accelerating your path to leadership.

The first is to go out and set up your own organisation. The learning will happen very fast. Even if the enterprise fails, you will have learned a lot. It can be an expensive way to learn. You will also find it very hard to go back to being an employee with a boss: once you have tasted freedom, the security of a large organisation will feel more like a prison.

The alternative way of accelerating leadership learning is by structured observation and discovery. Do not leave the learning to a random process of osmosis, which depends on getting some good role model bosses and good experiences. You might land up with some lousy role models and have some lousy experiences.

Instead, structure your learning from experience and from role models by using this book. Actively look, listen and learn. Use this book to understand what others do and what you do, then decide what works best for you. Use this book to accelerate your discovery process by knowing what to look for. There is no universal leadership formula: there is only what works for you and the people you work with.

Experience suggests that people largely ignore worksheets in books such as this. So we will save your time and the planet’s trees by not printing lots of structured observation worksheets. Instead, you can create your own customised worksheets to help you reflect on how peers and bosses do things either well or less well. If you force
Being professional

you yourself to observe and reflect on what is working and what is not working, you will quickly build up your own preferred operating style, which will be far better than some theoretically perfect technique described in a book.

To help you on your way, the list on the next page gives you 30 headings to start thinking about and observing. In each case, the goal is to find an example of someone who you thought did something well or poorly and figure out why you thought they did it well or poorly.

Do not be constrained by the headings in the list. Many of the things you observe will not fit into any obvious category. As we talked to leaders about the role models they admired, we picked up things which are often too subtle to be placed in any one category. For instance:

- ‘Our chairman never said a bad word about anyone, ever. As a result, we all trusted him. We knew we would not be bad-mouthed behind our backs.’

- ‘The head of products was decisive because he was focused. If you asked him for a decision on a marginal issue, he would decide instantly. If it was not part of his central agenda and the decision was finely balanced anyway, he figured that you might as well toss a coin.’

- ‘My boss helped when I was struggling. He did not tell me I was failing. He said he thought I was potentially great and could not understand what was holding me back. He asked for my ideas. I talked, he listened and by the end I left with total confidence that I and he knew what we needed to do to succeed.’

- ‘I used to get angry and would lose my temper. Then I realised, like road rage, it achieved nothing. I still get angry, but I cannot remember when I last lost my temper. I just assume the mask of leadership and ask myself, “How would a good leader act now?” I then calm down and act much better with the mask on.’
Over time, you will assemble a list of insights that work for you. In the course of this book you will discover some of the things that have worked for other leaders in the areas listed below. What works for others is not an answer for you, but it is a starting point on the journey to discovering how to make the best of who you are.

**Interpersonal skills**
- Setting goals and expectations
- Giving informal performance feedback (good and bad)
- Giving a formal assessment
- Motivating
- Managing and resolving conflict
- Giving praise and recognition

**Personal behaviours**
- Courtesy and etiquette
- Empathy
- Enthusiasm
- Stamina
- Risk taking and management

**Management skills**
- Meeting management
- Problem solving
- Negotiation
- Networking
- Upwards management
- Vision
- Time management
- Decision making
- Team management
- Project management
- Delegation
- Crisis management

**Communication skills**
- Presentations
- Listening
- Effective emails
- Effective reports
- Handling bad news
- Interviewing skills
Learning the local rules of the game

Every organisation has a set of rules which are not written down but are ignored at your peril. In some cases, the rules are plain confusing. When it comes to dress codes, an increasing number of organisations are totally schizophrenic. A large IT services company wants to look professional to its customers, so the dress code is fairly conservative suits and ties in the client marketplace. But it wants to appear funky, high-tech and youthful in the recruiting marketplace, so internally the dress code is very much dress down. In advertising agencies the client side and the creative side dress totally differently. Senior staff dress differently from junior staff. Dress codes are an elaborate way of declaring tribal loyalty and caste status.

Dress codes are a trivial but highly visible sign of the need to understand the local rules of the game. Understanding the rules becomes more important when it comes to matters such as taking risks and taking initiative. In the dealing room of an investment bank, risk taking is the life blood of the organisation. In the Civil Service it would be a nightmare for all the staff to be taking risks with the policies and procedures of the government.

The challenge is to learn the rules of the game fast. Even experienced leaders trip up on this. They hear the siren calls of the headhunter who lures them away to apparently greener pastures to work for a competitor. In theory, it should be easy. They know the industry and they know the job. But they do not know the culture of the new organisation; they do not have a network of support and alliances; they have no internal track record; and they do not know which levers to pull to make things happen. When the headhunter promises greener pastures elsewhere, remember that it is greenest where it rains most.
In theory, it should be possible to ask about the rules of the game. In practice, no one will tell you. It is a bit like asking people how they breathe; even if they knew the answer, they would still think it a pretty weird question. You have to pick up some clues and hints. At minimum, sit down with your boss early on and ask what their expectations are and what a good outcome in six months’ time looks like. You might also ask how you can really mess up. One boss who had hired me to be a salesman said the worst thing I could do would be to sell anything. This was, to put it mildly, surprising. I asked what I should do. ‘Make yourself useful,’ he said, unhelpfully. So I did: I left and set up a bank instead. It helps to get misunderstandings and bad bosses out of the way early.

The simplest way to find out the rules of the game is to look at people who are seen to be successful in the organisation – people who get promotions and bonuses. See how they dress, act, talk and work.

Learning some universal lessons of professionalism

The view from the top

The top leaders interviewed in the course of writing this book were very clear about what they expected from emerging leaders:

1 Loyalty.
2 Honesty.
3 Reliability.
4 Solutions.
5 Energy.

These five characteristics are closely linked. As you read through the characteristics, they may strike you as obvious and simple – who on earth would be disloyal, dishonest, unreliable, problem focused and slothful? Viewed from the top of the organisation, the
answer is: too many people. These are very common traps. This is great news for the emerging leader. It means that you do not have heroically to change the world single-handedly before you get noticed. You just have to do some very basic things thoroughly and well.

Loyalty

By far the most important of these characteristics is loyalty. Most leaders are forgiving of most things. As noted earlier, disloyalty is the one unforgivable sin; some leaders allow a second chance, but many will not.

In theory, loyalty should be a two-way street: it should be mutual. If you perform, your boss will help you succeed. In practice, the relationship is very uneven. You can hurt their career; they can kill yours. In its worst form, the loyalty pledge is used by control freak managers to keep followers tightly in line. If the control freak delivers on commitments to help you gain the right experience, the right assignments and the right promotion, you are lucky. Sometimes they simply block your career by controlling you and not developing you. At that point either you have to escape the boss and look for another organisation or you have to break the loyalty rule and find another boss in the same organisation.

Honesty

For leaders, honesty is closely connected to loyalty. Honesty does not mean ‘politician’s honesty’ where you are honest as long as you are not caught red-handed, lying through your teeth. Honesty means being open with the facts, especially when they are awkward facts about setbacks. Bosses hate surprises; it makes them look like they are not in control and not competent. If they know the awkward facts, at least you give them a chance to help you find a solution.
Reliability
If honesty is about having the courage to be open with awkward facts, reliability is about avoiding the need to deal with the awkward facts in the first place. As one leader put it: ‘Never bullshit me. Don’t over-promise. If you can do something, say so. If you say you can do it, do it. If you must, under-promise and over-deliver. Never over-promise and under-deliver.’ A critical part of reliability is learning to say ‘no’ to unreasonable requests and setting expectations right from the start. It is better to have one tough conversation about expectations before a project starts than to have three months of trying and failing to deliver the impossible. This is a lesson that effective leaders at all levels of the organisation understand intimately, especially when it is time to set and agree budgets.

Solutions
Some people bring problems; other people bring solutions. The curse of smart people is that they can see all the problems, they can see all the risks of any course of action and they can see how the boss is messing up. They ooze superiority and cynicism. Then they fail. Leaders do not succeed by proving they are smart. They succeed at least in part by seeing solutions, driving to action and getting results. This takes more courage than analysing and finding problems. It often means messing up, falling flat on your face and enduring the snide remarks of smarter people who predicted your fall. The difference is that you will learn more, achieve more and go further than the people who are smarter and less courageous.

Energy
Energy incorporates a lot of values that leaders look for: stamina, commitment, resilience, optimism, adaptability and a can-do spirit. These are positive words. In practice it means that the emerging leader is given a lot of rubbish to deal with and is expected to get on with it without complaining.
It is common for the newly minted MBA in a bank or consulting firm to figure out that despite their high salary, they are being paid less per hour than the partner’s secretary. This is a fair reflection of their relative value to the firm. It also reflects the reality that the marginal cost of a consultant or banker is close to zero – for a few free pizzas they can be kept working all night for no extra salary.

The 10 skills all leaders must master

1. **Motivate others**
   Show you care; recognise, reward and praise; build a sense of purpose, worth and community.

2. **Set a direction**
   Be clear about where you are going, how you will get there and how each person on your team has a role to play in getting there.

3. **Delegate**
   Stretch your team with challenging tasks; be rigid about the goals, flexible about the means; trust your team; delegate power; never delegate your responsibility or the blame.

4. **Deal with crises**
   Use crises to show your potential; drive to action; be positive; take the lead, don’t hide; avoid blame.

5. **Make decisions**

6. **Communicate well**
   Listen more than you talk; put yourself in the shoes of the person you are persuading; be clear and consistent; understand.

7. **Fight the right battles**
   Only fight when there is a prize worth fighting for, when you know you will win and when there is no other way of achieving your goal. It is better to win a friend than to win an argument.
8 Manage performance
Set clear expectations and stick with them; be consistent; provide support; give feedback early; accept no excuses.

9 Manage change
Address a worthwhile challenge; find the right team; start at the end and focus on the outcome you want; make it simple; break the big task down into short and simple steps.

10 Focus on the right things
Have clear goals for the year, quarter, month, week and today. Get on with it. Do not mistake the noise of management, such as emails, with the purpose of leadership.
The sweatshop approach to learning the business is not pretty. But all the leaders we talked to had an intimate knowledge of their business. The owner of a chain of 650 shops not only knew all the area managers; he also knew by name and face most of the shop managers and their staff. He had driven several hundred thousand miles around the country over 40 years building his knowledge of the business.

The view from the bottom

Professionalism is not just about impressing the boss. It also means acquiring a set of behaviours which make it easy for peers and teams to work with you. These are behaviours that become more important the more senior a leader becomes. From doing 360-degree reviews with emerging leaders, there are a few consistent complaints that people make about their colleagues. As I do these reviews, I find that everyone tends to share the same view, with the one exception of the person who is irritating all their colleagues. They are damaging themselves and their reputations without realising it. The following complaints come from an exceptionally good organisation. In other organisations, similar comments are typical but the intensity with which they are voiced is much greater. In rough order of priority, the comments are:

- **Not communicating**. Staff like to know what the boss is doing and why. Equally, the boss likes to know what staff are doing. It is very hard in a professional organisation to manage capacity: are people overworked or not? Work is often open ended and ambiguous. Regularly letting the boss know where you are helps with capacity planning; it helps as an early warning system for problems; it helps with disaster recovery. If you fall ill with stress, at least it should be clear how to pick up the pieces.

- **Public, not private, arguments**. This can be as simple as one off-guard comment, something like ‘this group is the best we have’, which then is sure to demotivate all the other groups. In its worst form, it involves public abuse.
- **Game playing and politicking.** Everyone knows who the politicians are. They play one side off against another and use half-truths to confuse things and get their way. They succeed in the short term but kill their credibility in the long term.

- **Bullying.** This is as simple as delegating badly and late. The ‘hospital pass’ delegation is to receive a project too late and when it fails, you get the blame. A near variation is to delegate all the rubbish and convert staff into administrative assistants. Effective delegation means delegating projects, as well as some rubbish, which will allow emerging leaders to learn and grow.

- **Bad habits.** This can be anything from turning up late to poor dress. Everyone else knows it. Make yourself approachable so that you are not left in the dark about how your habits affect other people.

- **Personalising feedback and conflicts.** The ensuing sulks help no one and achieve nothing.

So how do you deal with dysfunctional behaviour from peers, colleagues and bosses? Inevitably, every situation is both messy and unique. But here are five principles for you to follow. You should use each technique in turn. If the first technique does not work, escalate to the second and beyond:

1. **Control your feelings.** If someone irritates you, that is your problem and not theirs. Sometimes the hardest thing to control is our own feelings. But we always have a choice about how we feel: happy, angry, frustrated, relaxed. If you can master your emotions, then you will find that dysfunctional behaviour has little effect on you. You may observe it, but you will not be affected by it. Problem solved. But it is not always that easy.

2. **Remain as a role model.** You will be judged as much by how you behave as by what you do. So it pays to remain positive and professional. If you mirror the dysfunctional behaviour of others, you will find that things get worse, not better.
3 **Give feedback.** If you are genuinely affected by someone’s behaviour, then you have to deal with it. Do not pretend that you are helping them: be clear that you want their help in making your life easier. Ask them to help you by stopping or changing what they do.

4 **Protect your interests.** If none of the above works and your performance is being disrupted by politicking or interference, then you need to protect your interests. Do not be passive and roll over. Do not be aggressive and fight. The middle way is to be assertive: be clear about what your interests, needs and obligations are. Marshal support from peers and colleagues to protect your interests. Do not personalise the problem: stay professional and focus on the issues. This is always a messy process, so remember that you have to remain the role model. Let others mess up by behaving the wrong way.

5 **Get help.** No boss likes intervening in disputes. It only lands up in a ‘he said, she said, but they didn’t and I meant ...’ discussion. But you can ask for coaching and advice. You will still appear weak for not having sorted out the problem yourself, but this is better than letting the problem get out of hand. Talk to people you trust.

**Learning business survival etiquette**

Leaders do not have to have great etiquette, but it helps. With some notable exceptions, etiquette tends to improve the further up the organisation people go. At the bottom, there is often low awareness of what is acceptable and what is not. In the middle, people are jostling so hard for position that courtesy gets shoved to one side. At the top, people have the time and space for grace.

So why bother until you get to the top?
Etiquette is fundamentally about putting the other person at ease and making them feel valued, respected and important. Poor etiquette fails on all these counts. Think about it. Who would you rather deal with: someone who feels at ease, valued and respected or someone who is feeling uncomfortable, defensive and devalued? Many people, sadly, would answer the latter. Powerful buyers have been known to make suppliers dance for their amusement; job applicants are often put under great stress. Little power makes little people into little tyrants. They may enjoy abusing interviewees and suppliers, but it does little to help the business.

Emerging leaders need a network of support and trust. They need followers, peers and bosses who value and respect them. Poor etiquette simply makes it harder to gain respect; good etiquette helps gain respect.

Clearly, etiquette varies from country to country and from company to company. Japan, for example, has very formal rituals for meeting people for the first time:

- offer meishi (name card) with both hands and bow
- read meishi: the name card really gives guidance to who should have bowed first, longest and deepest depending on level, location, company, etc.

If this seems difficult for a non-Japanese businessperson to do, think how hard British etiquette is. One senior Japanese businessman finally plucked up the courage to ask me how to shake hands. Duh. It’s so obvious, isn’t it? Until you try to explain it: how and on what occasions, how do you signal that you want to shake hands, how do you know when the other person wants to shake, how hard do you press and for how long? Bowing is simple by comparison.

So let’s look at some fairly basic etiquette which is routinely missed.
Promptness

This is not just about respecting the other person’s time, although that is important. It is also about using time well.

Case Study

Being on time

The best salesperson I know routinely prepares and leaves for important meetings early; if the plane or train is delayed or the travel instructions are ambiguous, he will still be early. As a result, when he travels he is always focused on his final meeting preparations; he is never late or stressed or unfocused on arrival. He gets through fewer meetings, but he is very good at them. Another salesperson I know is charming but routinely late. She spends the first 15 minutes apologising and catching up on the meeting’s progress. Sometimes her charm seduces clients. Other times, although the client smiles when she leaves, we are later told never to send her back again.

You do not lose clients or friends being early, but you can lose them being late.

Focus

Good leaders, even at the top, have the habit of making you feel that you are the most important thing in their lives at that moment. They focus completely on you. This can be unnerving but is also effective leadership. They really are focused and they really do make the other person feel important. Good leaders assure focus in some simple ways:

• no interruptions from calls
• mobile phone off
• no playing with PDAs in the meeting.
A good way to show that you think other people are really unimportant is to check your PDA often to see if there are any interesting blogs by yodelling accordion players or to answer your phone on the off chance that someone might be able to teach your hamster yoga.

**Courtesy**

‘Thank you’ is not a difficult phrase. Try it.

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**Case Study**

**Good manners cost nothing**

After I joined a new partnership, I unexpectedly found that the secretarial group was being very helpful to me at all times. I asked what was going on. They told me that at the annual partners’ conference, I had been the only one of a thousand partners who had gone to their lair to thank them for all the thankless work they had been putting in behind the scenes.

People like to be praised, and it costs very little to do.

**Responsiveness**

Answering the phone inside three rings, replying to emails quickly and following up on commitments promptly makes it look like you are in control and it also minimises effort. Slow response often leads to confusion and rework: do it once, do it right. Of course, if there are people you really do not want to be harassed by, then not answering is the best way forward.

**The personal touch**

In the high-tech world, it pays to be high touch. There are many ways of adding the personal touch. A few examples:
Try walking with your guest back to the lobby or lift when they depart, instead of having them escorted by a secretary. This can be a ‘Columbo moment’ (after the TV detective in a dirty mac). As he was leaving, Columbo would turn and ask one innocent but devastating question; the suspect, who would have relaxed, would blurt out the truth unintentionally. In the same way, after a formal meeting or interview, you often get to the truth as your guest relaxes on the way out. In any event, they will feel appreciated.

Email is just another of the hundred irritations every day; a handwritten note in an old-fashioned envelope commands attention.

Learn names and use them back. The sweetest word in the language is someone’s own name. They not only respond; they are grateful you took the trouble to remember. If you are stuck for conversation, remember that few people can resist talking about their favourite subject: themselves. Ask them, look interested and you will win a friend.

Etiquette can get to be very painful if the focus is only on rules – everything from how invitations should be prepared to how to make small talk at dinner. The rules change from place to place and from time to time. The rules of etiquette are not important from a leadership perspective. The purpose of etiquette is important:

- Make the other person feel at ease.
- Make the other person feel valued, respected and important.

These are useful skills for a leader to have. Ultimately, good etiquette involves decentring: focus on seeing the world through the eyes of the other person. If you can do this, then you will not need rules of behaviour – you will naturally work out the right thing to do in each situation.
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