

Alice **Leadership** **in Wonderland**

**How to lead when the world
no longer behaves the way
you expect**

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*What if the problem
is not that the world is
more complex...*

*but that we are still
looking at it through the
wrong lens?*



Introduction

Why you are here (and shouldn't leave)

You picked up this book in the business section, and the first thing you noticed was that it does not seem to belong there. Alice is on the cover. Alice, as in Wonderland, as in the rabbit hole, with the grinning cat and the queen who keeps demanding that heads come off... And for a moment, you almost certainly thought some version of the thought that everyone thinks at exactly this point: “What on earth is this book doing on this shelf? This is plainly not a business book.”

You are right. It is not a business book.

And that is, precisely, why it is.

So before you slide it back between the strategy manuals and the seven-step turnaround guides, and reach for something with a confident graph on the cover, give me a few pages. It will not take long. And the reason this book does not look like the others may be the very reason it is the only one on the shelf still telling you the truth.

It will not pretend to hand you a silver bullet, for the simple reason that there is no silver bullet, and the people still selling you one are a large part of why you feel the way you currently feel – slightly behind, slightly braced, working harder than ever for results that no longer arrive the way they used to. What this book does is quieter and far more useful than a quick fix, because *it sets out to help you find the mindset you need to lead in a world that has stopped obeying the old rules*. A world you can already sense pressing in around you, where the maps no longer match the terrain and the very strategies that built your career have begun, without any warning, to misfire.

I use the word *find* on purpose, rather than the word learn, because you are not actually missing anything. You already carry what this asks of you, and you always have, but it has been trained out of you slowly, slide by slide and quarter by quarter, by a world that rewarded certainty and quietly punished curiosity. The work ahead of you is not to acquire some new and fashionable capability but to recover something you were gradually talked out of, and to trust it again.

I should warn you, in fairness, that reading this book will hurt a little in places, because you will recognise yourself in stories about capable people who meant well, did the sensible thing, and watched it go awry anyway. And you will see your own meetings in it, your own reasonable decisions, your own carefully argued mistakes. That sting is not an accident, nor is it a verdict. If you let it do its work, it may prove to be the most valuable part of the whole book. Because the moment a pattern stops being something other people fall into and becomes something you recognise yourself doing is the only moment from which anything can truly change.

Here is the part that the business section will almost never put into words. It is not you. You are not slow, or blind, or insufficiently strategic. You are a capable person applying a perfectly sound logic to a world that has quietly changed its rules. And the universe, as it turns out, has been playing the same trick on all of us at once, moving the ground while we were busy doing everything right. That is not failure. That is simply the reality we are now leading in. Pretending otherwise is the one move guaranteed to make it worse.

Which is exactly why the right face for a book about leadership today is not a fighter jet or a chess piece or a figure planting a flag on a summit, but a girl who fell into a world where nothing worked the way she had been taught. A girl who did not panic, and did not waste energy insisting that the old rules still applied, but instead looked, and listened, and grew curious, and found her way in a place that made no sense by the standards she arrived with.



*That is why you
are here.*

*That is why we
are Alice.*

In Wonderland



Why every manager ends up in Wonderland

I need to start with a confession. As a child, I disliked the book *Alice in Wonderland*. Not mildly. Not temporarily. I simply didn't see the point. I remember the book on my parents' shelf. It looked respectable. Read, but not too read. The kind of book that signals culture rather than passion. I picked it up out of curiosity – I was always drawn to objects that seemed to hide something – but once I started reading, I lost interest quickly. Talking cats. Disappearing smiles. Tea parties that went nowhere. Rules that changed mid-sentence. As a child, I preferred stories with structure. Clear heroes. Clear villains. Clear cause and effect. *Wonderland* had none of that. So I put the book back and forgot about it.

Years later, studying literature in Antwerp, the book resurfaced. I understood it better the second time. I appreciated the wordplay, the paradoxes, the intellectual architecture. I recognised what Carroll was doing. I passed the exam. And afterwards I forgot the book again. Then, much later, something changed. I was walking through London (Soho – early morning, no sleep, no destination) when I noticed an old edition of *Alice in Wonderland* in the window of a small, pretty chaotic bookshop. Weeks later, I returned and bought it. It was expensive. It was unplanned. It was almost instinctive.

During that period, I was regularly lecturing and giving talks on strategy, leadership, and transformation. Anything digital was just a ripple. A warning sign. Something bigger was happening. In front of experienced executives – people with impressive titles and long track records – I found myself searching for a language that could explain what was happening and how to make sure it would be noticed. Something was happening outside of their companies. Markets behaved oddly. Customers came and went faster than planning cycles. Technologies crossed industry boundaries. Competitors appeared out of nowhere. Rules shifted after decisions had been made.

I bought the book. And then one day – without planning it – I said to a room full of senior leaders: “Imagine you wake up in Wonderland, a world where the rules change the moment you think you understand them.” The room laughed. Not because it was funny, but because it was recognisable. That was the moment I realised why *Alice in Wonderland* had come back to me. Not as a children’s story. Not as literature. But as a surprisingly accurate description of the world managers are now expected to lead in.

This book is not about Alice. It is about the world we are operating in – a world that increasingly behaves like Wonderland. And it is about what leadership looks like when rules change faster than strategies, expertise expires quickly, certainty becomes dangerous, and pretending to have answers is riskier than admitting you have questions.

Welcome to Wonderland.



Why this is a fairy tale

And why that should concern
any serious leader

Fairy tales are systematically underestimated in modern, rationalist cultures. They are often framed as harmless narratives for children, stripped of epistemic or strategic value. This framing is historically inaccurate. Fairy tales predate childhood as a protected developmental category and were never intended as entertainment for the young. They functioned as structured carriers of collective knowledge, encoding social norms, moral boundaries, risk patterns, and survival strategies long before the emergence of formal education or scientific disciplines.

Seen through this lens, fairy tales were early cognitive technologies. They compressed complex, often chaotic realities into symbolic structures that could be remembered, transmitted, and reinterpreted across generations. In modern terms, they functioned as high-level models: not precise in detail, but structurally accurate. This is why a book that attempts to understand the contemporary world cannot rely on rational analysis alone. The world has not become simpler; it has become structurally more complex. Fairy tales are not a retreat from seriousness. They are one of its oldest forms.

The contemporary leadership paradox

Leaders today operate in an environment that is historically unprecedented, not merely because of speed, but because of simultaneity. Technological acceleration, global interdependence, ecological constraints, geopolitical instability, and cognitive overload are unfolding at the same time and interacting in non-linear ways. Paradoxically, this occurs in a context of unprecedented informational abundance. Data availability has never been higher. Analytical tools have never been more sophisticated. And yet, subjective understanding is declining.

The issue, therefore, is not intelligence, competence, or access to information. It is a mismatch between the nature of the world and the cognitive instruments used to interpret it. Most leadership tools still

assume relative stability. They name discomfort without reshaping perception. What leaders increasingly lack is not analysis, but orientation.

Beyond VUCA

VUCA once helped leaders articulate discomfort. However, it remains descriptive rather than explanatory. It labels volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity without revealing the underlying mechanics that generate them. Where VUCA observes, ALICE describes the construction of the world itself: the physics of contemporary change. This book begins where VUCA ends.

Alice is not fictional. She is distilled. She represents the structural logic of a world in which reference points dissolve faster than institutions can adapt. This book uses *Alice in Wonderland* not as a metaphorical decoration, but as a methodological lens, as a way to train perception rather than prescribe behaviour.

Imagination is no longer optional. It is a leadership capability. This book is not meant to be read passively. It is meant to be used. Because in Wonderland, as in the world we now inhabit, everything changes the moment we believe we finally understand it.

A small misalignment

There is something I should probably say here. For a long time, I thought I was seeing clearly, simply because I was asking the right questions. I was working with a company I knew well. Not a brief client engagement, but an organisation with which I had a long history. Context. Trust. Access. The kind of place where people speak freely because they assume you already understand the terrain. The signals were there – they always are. Customers behaving just slightly differently. Teams asking questions that didn't fit the strategy language. A tension

in meetings that had nothing to do with disagreement and everything to do with unease.

I noticed all of it and still I explained it away. Not because I didn't care. Not because I was blind. But because I had a story that made sense. I told myself this was normal turbulence. That the fundamentals were strong. That we just needed to communicate better, align faster, execute more crisply.

In hindsight, I realised what happened. I wasn't wrong, but I wasn't curious enough either. I was trying to understand the situation using the tools that had worked for me before. I was interpreting change instead of sitting with it. Naming it instead of letting it disturb me. Nothing collapsed. There was no dramatic failure. Which made it harder to notice the miss. The real missed opportunity only became visible later, when others – with less certainty and more doubt – started asking questions I hadn't allowed myself to ask yet.

That moment stayed with me. Not as regret, as recalibration. It reminded me that awareness is not the same as alertness. That experience can quietly become a filter. That expertise, if left unchecked, has a habit of explaining away the unfamiliar instead of making room for it. That is why this book does not argue for answers. And why I don't trust leaders who claim to "see it all coming." The real shift never announces itself loudly. It arrives sideways. Through discomfort. Through questions that don't fit the agenda. The moment you feel the need to explain too quickly is often the moment you should pause instead.

Why these stories are true without being named

I spend a lot of time inside organisations. What I see there (what people trust me with) rarely fits into a slide, a framework, or a neatly packaged case study. They are not success stories. They are not failures either. They are moments. Doubts that are half-spoken and then carefully put

back where they came from. Silences that fall after a meeting in which everything was supposedly “clear”. Glances that linger just a little too long when someone says something that doesn’t quite fit the plan, but feels undeniably true.

Many organisations function perfectly well. Processes run. KPIs are met. Reports look polished. And yet something shifts beneath the surface. As if, somewhere along the way, the organisation lost its own logic, without anyone being able to point to the exact moment it happened.

In *Net Curiosity Score*, I already drew deeply from my own past, from decisions I misjudged, assumptions I held onto for too long, patterns I only understood in hindsight. That experience made me more careful. Not less honest about what I want to say, but more deliberate about how I say it. The moment I name names, the story shifts. It stops being about us and becomes about them. Distance appears. Judgement creeps in. The reader can lean back and think: interesting, but this is not me. And this book is about proximity.

What I describe happens everywhere. In boardrooms that are deeply confident in their own reasoning, until they suddenly realise the world has moved somewhere else. In innovative companies that talk so much about renewal that they slowly become afraid of their own people. In organisations perfectly optimised for a reality that no longer exists. But also – and this matters just as much – in teams that quietly, often against the current, dare to try something new. Without a grand plan. Without the right words. Simply because it feels right. Because it works in a way that cannot yet be explained, but can already be felt.

These are the stories that follow. Not cases to admire or condemn. But composite realities, shaped by hundreds of conversations, observations, and personal experiences. Masked enough to avoid pinning people down. Sharp enough to allow recognition. Not to protect anyone. But to create space. So that this is not about them. But about us.

There is a particular kind of failure that does not announce itself. It is not the failure of the careless, the lazy, or the unprepared. Those failures are easy to explain, and easier still to forgive. The failure that interests me here is quieter and far more unsettling, because it happens to people who saw clearly, decided carefully, and acted in good faith. They did, by every reasonable standard, the right thing. And it went wrong anyway.

This is the most uncomfortable territory in leadership, and it is almost never written about honestly. We prefer stories with villains. A reckless executive, a blind board, a culture rotten at the core. Those stories are satisfying because they let the rest of us off the hook. If failure belongs to the foolish, then the careful are safe. The trouble is that this is not how most organisations actually fail. They fail while staffed by intelligent people who were paying attention. They fail in rooms full of experience. They fail politely, reasonably, and on schedule.

The twenty stories that follow are about exactly that. Each one describes a moment in which someone sensed correctly, judged sensibly, and still ended up on the wrong side of the outcome. A board that studied the early signals and concluded, with discipline, that the signals were too weak to act on. A team that felt the change before anyone else and raised it, only to be thanked and redirected. A budget line that moved sideways into something unnamed, and the quiet courage and quiet defeat that came with it. None of these people were wrong about what they saw. They were defeated by the lens through which they saw it, and by the systems that rewarded them for keeping that lens firmly in place.

That is why these stories belong here, immediately after the mirrors. The mirrors are the diagnosis. They explain, in the language of cognition and culture, why being right protects the past, why we expect change to arrive in a straight line, why we defend a familiar map more fiercely than unfamiliar territory. All of that is true, and all of it is abstract. A diagnosis you only understand intellectually changes nothing. You nod, you agree, you turn the page, and you carry on behaving exactly as before. These stories exist to close that gap. They take the diagnosis out of the seminar room and put

it back where it actually lives: in a meeting, on a Tuesday, with real people who had real reasons for their actions.

Read together, they describe a recurring pattern. Someone perceives something real. The perception is correct. And then the organisation does what organisations are built to do: it asks for proof, for a pattern, for a business case, for consensus, for a little more certainty before anything moves. By the time certainty arrives, the moment has passed. The signal that was once early and inexpensive to act on has become a crisis that is late and expensive. No one behaved irrationally at any single step. Each request for more evidence was defensible on its own. The failure was not in any one decision but in the accumulation of sensible decisions, each one buying comfort and spending time. That is the cruelty of it. These are not failures of intelligence. They are failures of permission, of translation, and of timing – and those are far harder to see because nothing in the room ever looks like a mistake while it is being made.

Why stories and not case studies

I want to be precise about what these are, and what they are not. They are not case studies. There are no company names here, no industries identified, no individuals you could find later and hold accountable. Each story is a composite, built from hundreds of conversations, observations, and experiences gathered across sectors, countries, and levels of hierarchy. The details have been dissolved and recast so that no single organisation stands behind any one of them. However, many organisations stand behind all of them.

This fictionalisation is deliberate, and it is not about discretion. If I named names, you would do the thing we all do with other people's failures: you would diagnose them. You would decide what they should have seen, what you would have done differently, how their situation differs from yours. The naming would turn the story into a verdict, and the verdict would be about those people. The whole point is that it is not about them. It is about us. It is about the entirely ordinary condi-

tions under which good judgement produces bad outcomes, conditions that exist in your organisation as surely as they existed in the rooms where these stories originated.

So I have fictionalised them enough to make them impossible to pin down, and sharpened them enough to make them impossible to dismiss. The effect I am after is recognition rather than analysis. Not the cool, distancing thought, “That was a poorly run company,” but the warmer, yet more disturbing one: “I have been in that room. I have said that sentence. I have closed that slide.” The moment a story stops being about a stranger and becomes a mirror held up to your own week, it has done its work.

How to read them

Read them slowly. They are short on purpose, and the white space between the lines is not a layout choice; it is where the recognition happens. Resist the urge to extract a lesson from each one as if it were a management parable with a moral stamped on the last page. These stories are not instructions. They do not tell you what to do. They capture the moment just before things start to go wrong, while everyone involved still believes they are doing the right thing. That earlier moment, the one before the outcome becomes obvious, is the only moment in which anything can still be changed. Learning to recognise it is the entire purpose.

Recognition, when it comes, is not a comfortable feeling, nor do I want it to be. There is a small sting in seeing yourself in a story about failure. Let the sting do its work. It is the most useful sensation in this entire book, because it is the point at which a pattern stops being something other people fall into and becomes something you might catch yourself falling into next week. Comfort changes nothing. The faint discomfort of recognition is the beginning of agency. You cannot interrupt a habit you refuse to see.