

Leadership Full Circle

About having big Ambitions
and no final Destination

Leadership Full Circle

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A Word of Thanks

At the risk of forgetting someone, I want to express special thanks:

To my wife and two sons, who define me more than anything else in my life and who are a major source of inspiration to me every day. They have allowed me to imagine more, do more and be more. If only more leaders had such an inspirational influence.

To all the people I have worked with as their team member, colleague or manager. They have all been instrumental in my growth as a person, as a coach and as a manager. To some of them, I may even owe an apology for not always being the leader or colleague they deserved.

To all my clients who have shown me parts of the world I would otherwise never have discovered or understood. I hope that our work together has brought you the perspective you were looking for.

To our neighbour and friend Johan, who has scrutinised my amateur English with his linguistic perfectionist view. It is always a pleasure to work with people that make one's life more complete.

To all the readers who show their interest in my book and especially to those who see it through to the end. May they find some inspiration in it for both their professional and personal life.

To all the writers of non-fiction books that have gone before me. You have given me inspiration, stuff to think about and frameworks that helped me understand the complexity of my experiences and the world around me.

Dedicating this Book

It is only natural that I should dedicate this book to my wife Linda for many reasons.

First of all, I believe she has more leadership capabilities than some managers and CEOs I have worked with. She has raised almost single-handedly our two magnificent sons to exemplary independent adults while always staying in the background and never making a fuzz. There are many similarities between leadership and such parenthood, as you may discover throughout this book.

Isn't the purpose of parenthood to develop strong independent happy adults that embody your values and develop their own vision, always able to fall back on the solid basis you gave them? When my wife decided to give up her career as a pharmaceutical chemist and dedicate her life to raising our sons, she clearly had a personal mission and has done a formidable job in fulfilling that mission.

Furthermore, when I look back on the opportunities I have been able to explore because of her patient yet energetic support in sometimes demanding and difficult periods, it is obvious that without our warm and solid home, I would never have had the life changing and fulfilling experiences I had the pleasure of exploring. I can truly say her support has been the most contributing factor to the person I am today.

If I take stock of personal achievements, I need to admit that sometimes it looks like I do not have much to show for. Yet I hope that in my own way, I have also contributed to the home we have created for our family. As far as professional achievements go, the management titles have been impressive but are long gone with the resumé that my outplacement consultant tossed in the bin when we first met. She was harsh but pointed me in the right direction when she suggested I needed to think not about what I had done so far, but about what I intended to contribute to the world going forward.

After all, what do we have to show for if not the legacy of our family and the values and mission we inspire. This was illustrated to me when I was made redundant at the age of 55 after an '*impressive*' career of 30 years.

From one day to next I was no longer 'Finance Director', I was just Marc, husband to Linda and proud father of 2 sons. My colleagues also reminded me of my legacy to them. I received over 60 letters thanking me for the support, training, help, inspiration they had experienced when working with me.

This is why I want to dedicate this book to my wife Linda, because she is my true leader, with a clarity of what is important and the right tips on what is really a priority. She also has the never failing energy to connect with others, where I tend to seek too many answers within myself. She understands the benefits of synergies of interacting with others better than anyone else. She is my inspiration for being a good parent and constantly helps me in developing the appropriate skills. Many parts of the book are inspired by her.

The analogy between parenthood and leadership is often underestimated. Here are a few thoughts that can help seeing the similarities.

Everyone can learn how to be a parent but that does not mean that everyone should be one or wants to be one. The same can be said about leadership. Everyone can learn how to be a leader but that does not mean that everyone should be one or wants to be one. In my workshops I often ask the question: *'Why did you choose to become a leader?'* When people are honest, they sometimes have to admit that either they did not ask for it but accepted the role without really knowing what it meant. Or they were ambitious to grow in their career and were looking for a higher pay grade. As you will see in this book, those may not be the best motives to become a leader.

Some people want to become a parent, others just want kids. When I ask this question to some of my coachees, not all of them understand it. Some managers want to become a true leader, others just want followers. We will see that leadership is much more about what kind of person you want to be than what kind of personal ambition you want to fulfil.

When leading teams, we ought to think of them as families. Everyone is someone's father, mother, son, daughter, brother or sister. Thinking of our colleagues like that, creates an entirely different dynamic. The best families spend time together and as a result the members develop a profound

understanding and appreciation of themselves and each other. When we meet, we can discuss, agree, disagree, express our likes and dislikes openly, because we know we are safe. When it comes down to it, we have each other's back.

When raising children, we intend for them to grow up to independence, able to deal with the challenges of the world. We hope they will be able to define their own path, armed with the right wisdom and values. It means that initially we need to spend an awful amount of time and effort in command and control and as they grow to maturity we need to understand that they want to and can manage their own lives. The most challenging period is the adolescence phase, in which we know they are not yet fully equipped for life but they are convinced they are. We will see that the situational leadership model seems to reflect exactly the same phases as the growth from childhood to adulthood.

When reflecting on all this, I hope it becomes clear to the readers, why I need to say with great respect, admiration and gratitude that my wife has perhaps more leadership skills than some managers I have known or still encounter today.

Why should I?

To write or not to write, that was the question

I have had the good fortune of being made redundant for the first time in my life after a career of thirty years. The good fortune does not end there, this happened to be around the time I turned fifty-five. You may feel a sense of sarcasm in these statements and yet none is intended. I truly look back on this turning point as a life changing eye opener. But more about the relevance of that later.

The idea of writing a book has played in my head for about 3 years now and that should give you an idea about my introverted thinking personality preference. Never take hasty decisions, think it through and make sure you don't regret it later. Above all, the reluctance to start, stems from the limiting belief that perhaps the world is not waiting for another opinion on management or leadership and it definitely does not want to read mine.

Our good friend and neighbour Johan challenged my limiting belief with his simple comment: *'If everyone thought like that, there probably wouldn't be any books at all'*. And being a literature fanatic himself, he did not fail to add *'and the world would be a lot less interesting.'* This was a well appreciated trigger.

There are of course several other reasons that make the writing of a book appealing. As a management consultant and coach, I frequently have the pleasure to host *Leadership Development* and *Change Management* workshops and whilst there are plenty of guiding presentations and case material for those workshops, quite frequently participants ask me if I have any comprehensive book that captures the essence of what we discussed. It then occurred to me that I could probably do with such a book myself, if only to capture and bundle the great stories and insights of all the people I had the pleasure of meeting. One of the good fortunes of being fired, is coming out of the corporate cocoon and discovering that there is a world out there with so many interesting people to meet. To all these people I am eternally grateful, because they constantly remind me of how much there is yet to discover and how little time we actually have to do so. This was probably one source of my hesitation to start writing ; *'It seems the story is never going to be complete'*. As it happens, this turns out to be one of my messages. The message of a non-fiction book can never be *'final'*. Becoming a leader is also an infinite process, as we will come to see later.

The most compelling stimulus to start writing is of course, as with any type of motivation, emotional. On the one hand I could focus on the frustration from noticing how consistently the well-being of people is sacrificed in a corporate environment for the *greater good* of the shareholder value. However, that brings me in the downward spiral of the '*fixed mindset*' that goes against everything this book wants to promote. I prefer to focus on the joy we can experience from those leaders that understand their awesome responsibility to ensure the well-being of the people in their care. The leaders we are willing to help with their mission are the ones we know to have our best interest at heart.

Finally, I want to give a heads- up to the people that come to my workshops, call upon my coaching support or seek guidance in the design of their organisation and teams. If you are looking for a manual with *tips and tricks*, you do not need a leadership workshop. You need a magician. The message of the book, the workshops, the coaching is clear. True leadership is not about playing tricks on people. They are far too clever not to sense the manipulation in them. However, when they feel safe with you and know you genuinely care, they will not only follow you but will take you to the moon and back.

So what's so special about this book?

Nothing in particular I suppose, except that it does not just want to scratch the surface of 'Management Techniques' or 'Motivational Speech'. It is intended as an in-depth search into the whys and wherefores that certain ways of leading work and others don't. I am not interested in the short term compliance focussed management manipulation. If you do not understand people, you cannot understand leadership.

One of the clients of my early days as a consultant put it quite bluntly: '*They do not need to think too much, if only they could just do what I tell them to do!*'. I guess that is one way of looking at leadership. I did notice however that neither himself nor his people were having a lot of fun. He was constantly stressed out and his people were fearful of his reaction to their next mistake.

I guess it has become a passion of mine to keep digging for the underlying reasons why certain ways work and others don't. Once we understand the true nature of things, it becomes much easier to develop the right formula and make the right choices. It will be no surprise then that this book is not

laden with 'dos and don'ts' but rather with 'food for thought'. I have noticed time and again that explaining to people what to do or in other words 'teaching' them, does not help and quite often leads to resistance. Some authors feel that leadership is a learnable skill. With that, they make the justified reflection that leaders do not need to be 'born' but can learn to become one. I would rather see it as being able to grow into one, as it seems to be an endless journey of discovery of oneself and of others. This book intends to offer some guidelines for that journey and to show how much fun it can be to travel it.

So you can expect to be taken back to the very roots of the human race, physical as well as cultural, social and psychological. After a few coaching sessions, my earlier mentioned client made the reflection that he needed to become more of a psychologist rather than a real boss. These are the '*revelations*' that make us feel that our coaching journey together is worthwhile.

Well-being is at the core of my message, both for the leader and the people in his or her care. This is because I truly believe that is where it all starts. It is the source of the energy that is required for achieving remarkable goals. Knowing what generates or hampers that well-being is a fundamental need for the leader that wants to inspire rather than manipulate.

When companies invite me for an in-house leadership development program, they often include a detailed list of topics they want to be covered. Invariably the question '*How do I motivate my people?*' is part of such a list. I often respond by saying that '*to motivate*' is only a verb in the linguistic grammar sense. In a leadership context it is not something you do, nor is it a skill that you can acquire. One can compare it with doing fitness. Motivation is an outcome that requires numerous little practices that are consistently applied over a prolonged period of time. Perhaps one tip we can give to managers is to *stop de-motivating* their team members. That may be a good start.

So do not expect a '*manual*' or a '*recipe*' for good leadership, but do expect plenty of insights into human nature. They will make your role as a leader obvious, infinite, enjoyable and thoroughly connected with the world and the people in it.

Management is really out?

The dichotomy that is often presented of Management versus Leadership is in our view a false one. It is not an either or question. We will argue that management is an integral part of any leadership role, but it is by no means the only nor the most important one. This is where the integral world view of Ken Wilber and his '*Brief History of Everything*' model of evolution become very useful. This way of looking at the subject is much more holistic. Once we have established what the real purpose of leadership actually is, this holistic view puts a much wider perspective on it .

From this model we define four playing fields that all leaders need to work on to be effective. In short, we will be covering the significance of the collective fields of culture and structure of an organisation as well as the individual fields of human behaviour and motivation.

This integral world view is not the only step back that we take to create perspective. In order to understand the human species, we call upon Darwin's evolutionary theory. To that purpose, there is no better guide than Richard Dawkins' – *the Selfish Gene*. Through evolution we have become more and more socially conditioned. Therefore, we also need to understand what is meant by '*Man, the Social Animal*'. Indeed, half of us are other people. Our choices and behaviours are more socially influenced than we care to admit.

As motivation is a key question that keeps popping up in many different requests for leadership guidance, we cannot escape the need to fully understand the driving forces of human behaviour. The flip side of motivation is of course stress and depression. As we find well-being to be a significant part of the leadership mission, it is obvious that we also visit this flip side of motivation.

We may well have evolved to social animals for whom connection to others seems a defining characteristic, this does not mean that we all experience such connections the same way. The individualistic features of our own personalities have a distinctive impact on what drives us and how we like to be treated. We suggest that the statement '*there is no 'I' in Teams*' is fundamentally flawed, as teams are filled with individuals. Being able to connect with this diversity and seeing interdependence as a way to synergy rather than polarisation is a tremendous challenge for the contemporary leader.

'If you want to test a man's true character, all you need to do is give him power.' This Abraham Lincoln quote is still so true. Is power outdated as a corner stone of leadership? How does that relate to Brené Brown's¹ suggestion that the route to empathic leadership requires leaders to be vulnerable. We feel a need to explore power, strength and vulnerability as complementary rather than contradictory. As Brené rightfully points out, being vulnerable is not being weak. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to be able to be vulnerable. We often tend to confuse vulnerability with weakness.

Structure influences behaviour, so having the right organisation seems to be an important prerequisite to successful leadership. Autonomous teams work provided they are building blocks of a clear structure that defines ownership. As far back as in the teachings of Duran and Deming, we can find that dysfunctional structures will dilute and even undermine almost any team spirit. So there is a place for the systems focused manager in leadership as well. Designing the right organisation is essential for creating a team-friendly environment.

For those that were looking for tips and tricks, the question may come to mind: *'Are there no skills at all that you can teach us?'*

There is a skill we all possess but that we do not always use to its full potential. Anywhere I go, when there is a problem in an organisation, people mostly experience it as a communication problem. This would suggest that in leadership, the significance of language cannot be overestimated. While mastering a language may in itself be a challenge, using it adequately for leadership purposes goes beyond grammar and vocabulary.

We need communication to formulate the mission and the vision for our teams, in a way that inspires them rather than frightens them. We need it to make our social connections work, to share insights and knowledge and to support our people in so many different ways.

Whether it is verbal or non-verbal language, we will not be effective in its use, if we continue to see communication as a series of techniques and tricks to manipulate our team members. Communication styles, channels, tools or techniques are of no consequence if they do not come from the right mindset, attitude and people focused genuine interest.

¹ Brené Brown – *Dare to Lead*

This is where terms such as ‘active listening’ may confuse. To genuinely listen requires me being truly interested. To be interested, I must be convinced of the value of the person in front of me. Hence, if my beliefs say something else, any technique will be rightfully spotted as manipulation. A chapter on communication is certainly a must in the topic of leadership.

Where do you get the energy?

We suggested that being a leader can be an invigorating and joyful experience for yourself. Hearing about the potentially overwhelming task, one might get concerned about the effort and energy it requires. We touched upon stress earlier as the flip side of motivation, so we need to address the point of managing our energy in our role as a leader.

Surprisingly enough Western literature is very poor on the subject. Except for *The Power of Full Engagement* by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwarz², there seems to be only an occasional reference to the topic. Perhaps less surprising is the fact that Eastern philosophy and cultures seem to be more tuned into this need. The combination of the *Inner Engineering* principles of Sadhguru³ and the confrontation of Buddhism with Western psychology gives us a few good ideas on how to ensure the necessary awareness of ourselves. This can allow us maintain the energy and focus we so desperately need to be a good leader.

Full Circle?

In that respect, we hope to come full circle in this book. This does by no means imply that all is said and done. It merely suggests you can now make up your mind on which leader you want to be. Do not restrict yourself to your comfort zone with a fixed mindset. Hopefully, you will find that with the necessary insights into the human condition, you feel sufficiently equipped to start experimenting. Do not merely *believe* but experience it.

² Jim Loehr and Tony Swharz – *The Power of Full Engagement*

³ Sadghuru – *Inner Engineering*

What's the Point?

The best way to develop an idea or a concept is to question its usefulness, its purpose. So what is the point of leadership in the first place? The internet is full of statements of what leadership is about. Rather than listing them in this book, I suggest you just go and browse the Net. You could even ask your **AI** assistant to write it out for you. It is surprisingly accurate if you ask me. Perhaps this was another subconscious reason for labouring so long over my decision to write a book? Could **AI** do a better job? Here is my attempt to prove the contrary.

Why do we need a leader?

Not telling us what to do

In the animal kingdom, the sole purpose of the leader is to protect the herd. In most cases it is a male that protects the herd for the sake of safeguarding his genes for future generations. It often comes with a territorial instinct for the very same reason. For the herd to survive, the territory must provide the necessary food and drink and therefore intrusion is considered a threat to the longevity of the herd. It is therefore essential for the leader to be strong enough to fulfil that role. It is an impressive sight to observe a herd of elephants or zebras drinking. The herd can only drink without worry when they know the leader is not drinking at the same time, but is watching over them. This is why '*Leaders eat last*'⁴

We are still much like our mammal cousins in that we can only be productive or creative when we feel safe and we get stressed when we feel threatened or no longer in control of our environment. Can you start to see the awesome role we expect from a leader? If they cannot keep us safe as a minimum condition, why would we need them at all?

There is, however, more to it than just keeping our herd safe. Animals do not have the memory and foresight capabilities of the human race, nor do they have our inbuilt urge to constantly become more than we currently are. And as we are social animals, we tend to join groups or organisations that can help us in this quest to become more.

⁴ Simon Sinek – *Leaders Eat Last*

We therefore also expect from our leaders that they can show us ways in which we can fulfil our need to become more. We also hope they will help us achieve those goals either by individual support or by protecting and herding the group towards such inspirational destinations. Failure to do so may lead us to abandon the group and seek greener pastures. At the same time, some groups or organisations have their own purpose and aspirations and they expect their leaders to contribute to this mission and vision.

The way I introduce this in our leadership workshops is to give the participants the following statements to think about and to translate them to their own role as team leader.

‘The purpose of a leader is to inspire and enable people to join him or her in fulfilling a compelling mission and aspire to an invigoration vision. To this purpose, he or she must ensure that people are eager to come to work in the morning, enjoy a productive day and go home safe and satisfied in the evening.’

So we have short term expectations and long term expectations from our leaders. It goes without saying that achieving such an ambitious goal requires a great number of things to be addressed. Not in the least it may require the leader to understand each word in the purpose statement above and to be able to translate it for him or herself. All workshops around this statement have proven to be challenging, fun and defining for the participants. Some of its components may require some further reflection.

To **inspire** means to capture the hearts and minds of people. To that purpose, they should feel they can realise their own dream by joining in the mission and vision of their leader. This view stands in sharp contrast with the manipulation that uses rewards and punishments to get compliance with rules and instructions. Such an inspirational approach requires a good understanding of the human givens⁵ in general and of the talents and passions of each of the individuals in the team.

⁵ Yvan Tyrell – *Human Givens*