

The Unmasked Leader

The Unmasked Leader

Building High-Performance Teams
Through Authenticity and Values

Sarah De Schepper

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“Leadership is more than a title; it is a dynamic process of personal growth and transformation. It is the invisible thread connecting every fiber of an organization, from the precision of engineering to the strategy of finance.

It demands looking **beyond the façade**, the professional mask we often wear, to find the authentic core that truly drives us. By aligning our work with our deepest values, we do not just manage a group of people; we build a high-performance team rooted in trust.”



Part One:

The People

CHAPTER 1:

The Leap into the Unknown

My journey began in the early summer of 2018. At the time, I was four months pregnant with my son, while my nineteen-month-old daughter kept me on my toes at home. Life blended chaos and the beauty of early motherhood, and professionally, I felt settled and secure, right where I was meant to be.

The news that our sales manager had decided to leave the company surprised me, and her departure suddenly cleared a path for a future I had not yet imagined for myself. I had spent four years as a sales specialist; I knew the customers, I had mastered the portfolio, and I genuinely loved what I did. I was not searching for a new path, yet I felt a spark of curiosity and ambition that whispered, “*What if?*”

I sensed that management saw me as the natural successor, but there was a catch: they would not hand it to me on a silver platter. If I wanted this, I had to be the one to claim it. For two weeks, I wrestled with the idea before reaching out to the sales director. Before taking that leap into the unknown, I asked for advice from those who knew me best. One haunting question echoed in my mind, threatening to hold me back: “*Am I capable of doing this?*”

I had no experience as a manager and no background in leadership, so I felt unprepared for the weight of the responsibility. However, my friends and family entirely shifted my perspective. They told me the real question was not whether I could do it, but whether it would bring me fulfillment. It was not about ability; it was about passion.

The Shift from Peer to Leader

I made the choice to step forward, silencing the noise of what others might think or how the team might react. My focus was clear. After a rigorous process of interviews and assessments, the call finally came. I was the new sales manager.

While the opportunity thrilled me, the weight of reality followed a few moments later. I had moved from being a member of the circle to the one leading it.

It was clear that my biggest and most challenging task would not be hitting targets but earning the trust of those who had known me as a peer. The dynamic had shifted overnight because I was not just stepping into a new role; I was stepping into a new purpose, one that would require me to lead with both strength and a deep sense of responsibility to the team.

In the chapters that follow, I invite you to move beyond your own comfort zone. I will share the reality of my own evolution into leadership, stepping up to lead the team I had once worked alongside as a peer, and guide you through the transformation from peer to people leader. I will also pull back the curtain on a silent truth in the corporate world: the industry throws most of us into the deep end with no life jacket.

We will explore the “trial by fire” phase, that period where others expect you to lead before you have been taught how, and how to navigate the steep learning curve of on-the-job evolution.

This is my unfiltered journey, marked by both highs and lows. I wrote this book for those of you standing where I once stood, those of you still weighing up the choice, or the ambitious professionals ready to take that next step. Additionally, I wrote this for the seasoned leaders who have been in the game for years and are looking to expand their horizons, trading directive styles for a more modern and creative approach.

I don’t just want to share the principles and frameworks I have learned and often relied on, but I want to show you how I learned to apply and master them, not just in the easy wins, but also in the critical, high-pressure moments where leadership truly counts. I will share my own story, detailing how these specific strategies helped me navigate real-world challenges.

Together, we will explore how to build the courage to lead, earn trust from the ground up, and embrace the constant need to redefine ourselves. My goal is to show you how we are shifting away from the directive and “old-school” leadership styles of the past toward a more creative form of leadership, and why human-centered leaders are the true heartbeat of any successful company, today and in the future.

When I stepped into leadership, I quickly realized that the traditional, directive way of leading was broken. I didn’t want to just manage tasks; I wanted to ignite potential. I wanted to influence not by authority, but by connection.

My passion for writing this book arises from a deep conviction: leadership is about moving from commanding to coaching, from telling to asking, and from managing performance to empowering people. When you lead with authenticity, you give others the permission to do the same. When you adopt a consultative approach, you don't just solve problems for your team, but you build their capability to solve them themselves. That shift from individual heroics to collective growth is what truly drives me to empower you. This mindset is the red thread running through every page of this book: it helps you transition from a positional manager into an authentic, human-centered leader who leads people with purpose and impact.

To serve as a practical guide, this book offers the following principles:

- Reflective questions and inspiration corners to challenge your mindset.
- Exercises and templates to turn theory into immediate action.
- Scripts for difficult conversations to give you the words when you need them most.
- “If/Then” scenarios to prepare you for the unpredictable nature of leading people.

Surviving the “Deep End”

On Friday, you were the “star player,” the person who hit deadlines, mastered technical skills, and knew the nuances of the workflow better than anyone. On Monday, you become the manager.

The paradox of modern business is that we promote people because they are excellent at doing, and then we immediately ask them to stop doing and start leading. Yet, for most of us, there is no “leadership survival guide” during the weekend between those two roles. There is no secret manual left on your desk, and you certainly cannot download emotional intelligence overnight. Most new leaders start their journey in a state of “unconscious incompetence.” You don't know what you don't know.

You might think that leadership is just about being the person who makes the final decision, only to realize on day three that it's about managing the complex, messy, and often contradictory emotions of different human beings. The reality is that leadership is one of the few professions where you learn on the job, in real time, and with high stakes.

Every mistake you make is not just a typo in a spreadsheet; it bruises an ego, frustrates a team member, or misses an opportunity for someone's growth. Most companies spend a fortune on technical software, high-end laptops, and sleek office furniture, but next to nothing on training you how to avoid ruining your team's culture. If you feel like you're faking it, it's because you are, and that's exactly how almost every great leader started.

The hardest part of learning on the job is the psychological shift. When you are an individual contributor, your output defines your success. As a leader, theirs defines yours.

When you are not trained for this, your instinct is to revert to what you know: technical work. This is where “accidental micromanagement” is born. You jump in to fix things because you do not yet know how to coach someone else to fix them. You feel the pressure to have all the answers because you have not learned the power of asking the right questions. Since there is no formal school for the “messy middle” of leadership, you must become a scientist of your own behavior.

You must:

- 1. Observe your impact:** Watch how people react when you speak in meetings.
- 2. Audit your failures:** When a conversation goes sideways, shift your focus away from the other person and analyze your own delivery.
- 3. Look for the “why”:** Since no one gave you a framework, you must build your own by looking at the leaders you admire and deconstructing their moves.



The Unmasked Leader: Pre-Book Audit

This audit reflects the core philosophy of The Unmasked Leader: true leadership starts with deep self-awareness, dropping the protective armor of control, and moving from expertise to genuine human connection.

To translate my leadership framework into a practical self-assessment tool, I designed these core questions and dimensions based on my experience, observations, and vision for inspirational leadership.

Assess your current leadership mindset and baseline approach before diving into the book. Rate each statement on a scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

Section 1: The Internal Shift & Authenticity

- 1. I feel comfortable admitting to my team or colleagues that I don't have all the answers. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*
- 2. I focus on empowering others to take ownership, rather than stepping in to solve problems myself. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*
- 3. I have a clear view of my core personal values and know how to let them guide my decisions at work. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*

Section 2: Communication & Connection

- 1. I feel equipped to handle difficult or uncomfortable conversations with clarity and empathy. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*
- 2. I adapt my communication style to meet the individual needs and backgrounds of different team members or colleagues. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*
- 3. In my interactions, I prioritize deep listening and curiosity over giving immediate solutions or directions. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*

Section 3: Navigating Pressure & Boundaries

- 1. I know how to protect myself, my team or colleagues from external pressures and organizational noise without taking on all the stress myself. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*
- 2. I set clear boundaries between my professional responsibilities and my personal well-being to prevent burnout. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*
- 3. I feel confident speaking up and communicating transparently with senior management or stakeholders. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*

Section 4: Team Culture & Growth

1. *My primary goal as a (new) leader is to help others grow, build their autonomy, and succeed in their roles. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*
2. *I actively foster an environment where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities rather than failures. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*
3. *I regularly request and invite constructive feedback on my own performance or leadership style from those around me. [1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5]*

Scoring & Interpretation

Add up your scores across all twelve statements to calculate your overall result.

- **12 - 29 points: The Emerging Leader**

You may still feel the urge to rely on technical expertise, perfectionism, or high control, especially if you are new to the role. This book will help you build confidence, drop the armor, and lead with authenticity.

- **30 - 47 points: The Developing Leader**

You have strong foundational instincts and care about people, but might struggle with boundary-setting, handling high pressure, or letting go of control. This book will give you practical frameworks to bridge that gap.

- **48 - 60 points: The Grounded Leader**

You already lead with high self-awareness, empathy, and clear boundaries. Use this book to sharpen your leadership practice, navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, and mentor others.

Tip: *Write down your starting baseline score here: ____ / 60*

Return to this assessment after completing the final chapter to measure your shift in mindset and confidence.



Inspiration Corner: The “Rough Draft” Leader

Picture your first six months in leadership as a “rough draft.” If you’re just starting out or if you’ve been doing this for years, take yourself back to those early days.

Nobody expects a masterpiece on the first pass. Give yourself the grace to be a learner but have the discipline to be an active one. Your team will forgive a lack of experience, but they will not forgive a lack of care.

Exercise: The “Day 1” Audit

Grab a notebook and answer these three questions honestly:

- 1. What is the one thing I am most afraid my team will “find out” I do not know?
(This shows your primary learning gap.)*
- 2. In my first week, did I spend more time “doing” the work or “clearing the path” for others?*
- 3. Who is one person I can ask for unfiltered feedback on how my transition is affecting the team?*

The “I’m New at This” Script

You can use this script when you’re stepping into a new leadership position, especially if you’re now managing former peers and you feel the pressure to have everything figured out:

“I want to be transparent with you. While I’m excited to lead this group because I believe in our work, I’m also navigating the shift from peer to leader for the first time. I won’t have all the answers at once, and I might get the ‘leader’ part wrong sometimes. What I can promise is that I will listen, I will be open to your feedback, and we will figure out this new dynamic together.”

CHAPTER 2:

Leading Your Former Peers

When you haven't had formal training; your instinct is often to either be "too nice" (to keep the friendship) or "too tough" (to prove you're the manager). Both are traps. When you are learning on the fly, you might suffer from "the need to be liked." If you try to lead by being everyone's best friend, you will eventually make a hard decision that renders you "the villain." If your authority rests on friendship, that authority vanishes the moment you give constructive feedback.

The shift: Instead of striving to be liked, strive to be fair, predictable, and supportive. On-the-job training teaches you quickly that a team prefers a manager who is consistent and "has their back" over a manager who is "fun" but unreliable when the pressure is on. You can use the following "If/Then" scenarios to find the middle ground.

IF...	THEN...
A former peer tests a boundary (e.g., coming in late or missing a deadline because "it's just you").	Don't ignore it. Address it privately and immediately. <i>Say: "I value our history, but in this role, I must ensure the entire team is hitting the mark. When you're late, it puts me in a position where I cannot support the rest of the team fairly."</i>
A former peer expects "insider info" on company secrets or salary discussions.	Draw a hard line. Use the "role" hat technique. <i>Say: "As your colleague, I would love to tell you everything. But in my role as lead, I'm bound by confidentiality that I need to respect to keep this job. Let's stick to [topic X] for now."</i>
A peer is visibly resentful because they also applied for the promotion and didn't get it.	Acknowledge the elephant in the room. Don't pretend it's not there. <i>Say: "I know this transition is a shift for both of us. I truly value your expertise in [skill], and I want to make sure you're still positioned to grow here. How can we make this work?"</i>
The team stops inviting you to social lunches or goes quiet when you walk into the room.	Accept "professional loneliness." This is the hardest part of the transition. Don't force your way back in. Instead, focus on building trust through advocacy and support. The dynamic has changed; let it evolve into a new kind of respect.