

Ideas about

**The Future
of
Leadership**

Digby Scott



***Do not now seek the answers,
which cannot be given you
because you would not be able to live them.***

And the point is, to live everything.

Live the questions now.

***Perhaps you will then gradually,
without noticing it,
live along some distant day into the answer.***

Rainer Maria Rilke

Introduction: Leadership is Walking Through the Fog



“It all feels a bit soupy to me right now.”

So said a participant in a change leadership workshop I facilitated recently. His comment came right at the end of an intense session where leaders from across the organisation came together to wrestle with some big questions about change. They’re embarking upon a high-stakes, multi-year transformation programme, and the desire for clear answers was palpable.

Except there were no easy, clear answers. Just big questions, and some clues about what to pay attention to next.

Do you ever feel like it’s ‘a bit soupy?’ Or maybe even more than a bit? You know that feeling when you’ve got glimpses of what could be possible yet it’s frustratingly ethereal? It can be like travelling through fog. We’re going through it, shrouded, feeling our way. Then it tantalisingly clears for a moment. We can see where we’re going! Then it just as quickly closes in again. Arrgh! What to do?

The act of leadership is an act of creation.

Leadership, at its heart, is bringing people together to create something that hasn't existed before. That requires us to be OK with not having all of the answers. It requires us to master the liminal spaces we find ourselves in, and be adept in navigating the fog.

On the following pages, I share some thoughts on how you as a leader, and the people you lead, can find your way just that bit easier through the fog. Each chapter is short enough to digest over a coffee, with perhaps a reflective walk thrown in afterward. Some pieces give you a tool to try, while others simply leave you with ideas to sit with.

What unites them is my firm belief that these are all qualities and ways of being that we must master if we are to be effective as leaders in a complex world. Are they easy? No. Are they worthwhile? Absolutely.

So, scan the next page, notice what piques your curiosity, and go there. Rinse and repeat.

Go well...

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Deal in Energy



Everything is energy and that is all there is to it.

Albert Einstein

A few years ago, I was a participant in a three-day leadership training workshop. It was an intense three days for me and the rest of the group. For me, the first day was mostly 'up' - meeting new people, discovering new leadership frameworks, and learning about myself. The rest of the group seemed to similarly enjoy it.

When it came to the morning of day two, my energy was really flat. The work felt like it was heavier, and I was more subdued. As I looked around me, I could see the other participants also working hard.

At lunchtime, the facilitator (world-class leadership practitioner and researcher Jennifer Garvey-Berger) came up to me. She said that she'd observed my behaviour during the time we'd spent together as a group so far, and the energy I brought with it. What she said next has stuck with me for the past 10 years: "You're like an energy barometer: when you're up, the group goes up. When you're low, the group goes low."

I'd never realised, nor owned, that my energy had such a significant impact on a group. It was a gift of responsibility that I've kept to this day.

As I wrote in my book *Change Makers*: "You cannot not make an impact... whenever you show up, you have an impact, whether you consciously intend to or not."

Energy. It's the fuel of performance. Scientists define energy as 'the ability to do work'. Without energy, work simply doesn't happen.

Just Add Energy

As leaders, we can often think that our work is to rally the team around a common purpose. Well, yes, that's true. Yet if you think about it, what we're really trying to do there is to harness the collective energy of people to create something brilliant. We've seen too many purpose statements on websites and walls to know that a common purpose by itself isn't enough. A common purpose comes to life when we add energy to it.

That means helping people to feel that purpose every day. It's about helping them experience, as author Peter Block puts it, a 'quality of aliveness'. Mythologist Joseph Campbell mused that what people want most 'is an experience of being alive'. When we feel like we're 'alive', we both create and bring more energy to what we're doing. And better work gets done.

Leadership is about dealing in energy, first and foremost.

Put Your Energy First

With experience, I'm much more acutely aware of the need and responsibility to manage my own energy. If I want to do good 'work' in any domain - as a dad, partner, practitioner, speaker, author, athlete, or friend - I know in my bones that if I prioritise looking after myself, my 'work' is going to be better for it. One of my big life lessons (that I'm still working on) is learning to say 'no' to things that look like they'll be an energy drain rather than an energy gain. As I let go of FOMO, guilt and the need for approval, I become a better leader for others.

How to become an Energy Dealer:

Prioritise habits and activities that energise you.

For example, Nick Petrie's work on burnout has found that people who have an 'opposite world' - a regular activity that's very different from their day-to-day work - are less prone to burnout and more able to show up with energy over the long haul.

Learn to tell stories.

As Brene Brown puts it, 'stories are data with a soul'. Go beyond the numbers. That's head stuff. If you want to move people, you've got to get to the heart. That's what good stories do.

Prioritise presence.

You cannot not have an impact. If you're present in body, but your mind is elsewhere, people can tell. When you put your full attention on the person, or the group, in front of you, you're going to project a different energy. Just think of the last time you felt really listened to. My guess is you left that conversation more energised. To grow your presence, check out my prototype Dual Awareness cards, designed to help you be more present in the moment.

One last thing. Being 'energetic' and being a dealer in energy aren't the same thing. When we think of energetic people, we often imagine people who are sparky, bubbly, or charismatic. That's one way of showing energy, but it's not the full picture. What I'm talking about here is more aligned to authenticity than it is to acting. If you're not the sparky type, don't fake it. Bring your own energy, in your own way. When you do that, people feel it.

Go deal some energy!

Pursue Simplicity



***Life is really simple,
but we insist on making it complicated.***

Confucius

How would you simplify this paragraph?

This article is about identifying and removing superfluous, extraneous activities and information to get to the core essence of things so that end-users are enabled to practice simplicity in their endeavours and pursuits.

Here's how I'd do it:

This article is about simplicity.

How much effort did it take for you to work out what that first paragraph was actually saying? How about the second?

Being complicated comes at a cost. When we over-complicate things, we tax our brains. Its limited supply of energy gets used up on trying to make sense of stuff when it could be more productively used in other ways.

Complicated shows up everywhere. Last weekend I went to do an online grocery shop through the website of one of the major New Zealand supermarket chains. It took me three tries to work out how to get to the online shopping page. Then once I'd completed my order, I had to scroll and search through a bunch of options to confirm that my order was actually confirmed. I ended up assuming it was. Then I turned up at the supermarket the next day to find that the order hadn't been received.

Aaaagh! A good example of burning energy in the wrong way!

Leaders are dealers in energy. We want to ensure that our people are using their energy to do good work in the best way possible. Which means we need to pursue simplicity every day.

Here are three practices to help you develop your pursuit of simplicity:

Practice simplicity of language

Language is simply a way of representing an idea. We use language to transmit and develop ideas. The less energy we need to use on interpreting that idea, the more energy we can devote to building on it, and acting on it. The simple idea? Less is more. How can you use less words, paragraphs or bullet points to convey your idea? Hint: ask yourself how a picture, or a metaphor, could make the point instead.

Practice simplicity of design

Humans, by nature, tend to be additive. We add more stuff rather than take stuff away.

Here's an example of two phone designs:



One's designed with an additive approach. The other designers took a subtractive approach. Which is easier to use?

Practice simplicity of design by asking a few simple questions:

- What's the outcome we actually want here?
- What's essential to create that outcome?
- For anything else, what's the cost of adding that in?

Practice simplicity of systems

Director, videographer and good mate Cam Fink shared a profound idea on LinkedIn recently: the best experiences have the least friction. I like that. It reminded me of how I've deliberately set up systems in my life to remove friction. We all do it - automatic payments, templates to help me write faster, having three sets of glasses so I don't need to remember where they are: one for my work bag, one in the living room and one by my bed.

Another more extreme example: As you might know, I go back to Western Australia a couple of times a year for a windsurfing and surfing pilgrimage. For years I've lugged 40kg of gear through airports and spent heaps of extra time waiting for it to come out on the oversized luggage belt. Last year I decided I was completely over it. Now I have a full set of gear in both countries. Indulgent? Maybe? Does it remove friction and improve my experience? Definitely.

Author Tim Ferriss uses a great question which I'll paraphrase here: what's the one decision now that will remove a thousand other decisions down the line? The answer to that is usually the decision to put a system in place.

As Steve Jobs said "Simplicity can be harder than complex." Yet if you want to sustain energy, and good outcomes, over the long term, it's essential.

Pursue simplicity.

Upgrade Your Identity



***Every next level of your life
will require a different you.***

Leonardo DiCaprio

Dave Grohl used to be the drummer for Nirvana. For many years he's been considered one of the world's best rock drummers. Now he's the frontman and driving force of the Foo Fighters, with the guitar, not the drums, as his main instrument. With drumming at his core, he uses his innate sense of rhythm to write and perform memorable anthems that have made the Foo Fighters one of the most successful rock bands in the world.

I used to be a Chartered Accountant. Now I'm a leadership and culture specialist. While I'm no longer officially as CA, I use my knowledge of accounting, business and finance every day when working with clients to help me understand their context and challenges with a unique lens.

Our identity is a label we give ourselves. It shapes our sense of who we are, our purpose, and how we show up. Our identity is a powerful determinant of the results we get.

Our identity is also a work in progress. As our context evolves, so too must our identity.

How often have you seen leaders in roles where they rely primarily on their technical expertise to lead, rather than on cultivating and developing essential leadership skills. These people might be overheard saying "I've been so busy in 1:1's with my people. I haven't got any of my real work done." They're missing the point, right? In their role, the people work is the work.

Leaders who can't (or won't) evolve their identity to match the challenge of the work at hand risk holding back the potential that exists in their organisation (including their own). Teams and organisations that can't evolve their identity risk becoming noisy distractions (at best) or completely irrelevant (at worst).

Identity can be a tricky one to upgrade because it's often deeply linked with our sense of self-worth and security.

For example, for five years after I finished practicing as a CA, I continued to pay my annual \$900 fee to the Institute and do my 40 hours per year of mandatory professional development. I wanted to be able to say “I’m a Chartered Accountant”, as in my mind it carried heaps of credibility, and it made me more employable.

In truth, it was simply a security blanket. One day I realised that I could save myself a bunch of time and money by simply saying ‘I’m a former Chartered Accountant’ without losing any of the cred. Smart, hey? Yet before I could make the call, I needed to be honest with myself and be OK with letting go of the old version of ‘me’.

Transcend and Include

Upgrading your identity is not actually about letting go of your old identity. It’s about transcending it. It means keeping the essence of the old one, and maturing it. Dave Grohl hasn’t stopped identifying as a drummer. He just evolved to be more than it. He’s not just a drummer. He’s a messenger, and an entertainer.

Yuval Noah Harari, the acclaimed author of *Sapiens*, started his career as an academic historian. I heard him say on a recent podcast that he describes himself as a ‘kind of bridge’ between scientific and historical disciplines. Can you see how that label opens up new ways of thinking and being that the label ‘historian’ might not?

The Direction of Identity Upgrades

When working with leaders and leadership teams, I've found that identity shifts tend to happen in a few ways:

- away from 'ego-centric' leadership (it's all about me) towards 'eco-centric' leadership (it's all about the wider ecosystem I serve).
- away from 'technical' (what I know) towards 'results' (what I achieve) and ultimately towards 'system' (what I contribute)
- away from a 'problem focus' (make this problem go away) towards a 'possibility / purpose focus' (create more of what we want to see)
- Which one of these might be most relevant to you right now?

Ready for an Identify Upgrade?

Some questions for you to reflect on:

- What's your current identity (as a leader, friend, colleague etc)?
- How does that currently serve you?
- How might that be limiting you?
- What's the higher purpose that you could be serving?
- What sort of shift in your identity could serve that purpose better?

Wharton professor Adam Grant says that comfort comes from maintaining your identity, while growth comes from evolving your identity.

What do you choose? Comfort, or growth?

Upgrade your identity.

Practice Unhurried Leadership



***Speed itself has never been associated
with good work by those who have
achieved mastery in any given field.***

David Whyte

Imagine two versions of a boss. One is busy all day, bordering on frantic, moving at speed from one thing to the next. With seemingly no time to stop, they're hard to pin down. When you do get to talk, it's a quick transaction. No time for in-depth conversation.

The other is different. Like the first boss, they've got a lot on their plate, yet their demeanour suggests otherwise. They exude calmness. When you talk with them you feel like you're the centre of their attention, and that they have all the time in the world. They get stuff done, but they're not rushed.

Who would you rather work with? I know which one I'd choose.

Inaction breeds doubt and fear. Action breeds confidence and courage. If you want to conquer fear, do not sit home and think about it. Go out and get busy.

Dale Carnegie.

Dale Carnegie was a well-known early 20th-century American writer and educator. I think his quote above pretty much sums up how we still think about achievement and the leadership that comes with it. 'Go out and get busy'. The vast majority of leaders and cultures I work with appear to embrace this ethos. Busyness is rewarded over idleness. Delivery trumps discovery. Movement eclipses stillness.

In our 21st-century context, this approach has real limitations. Our societies, our organisations and we as individuals face a myriad of complex problems. Yet complex problems aren't usually solved by rushing headlong at them. They need a different sort of space and pace. One that can be shaped by a different sort of leadership.

Being busy does not always mean real work. The object of all work is production or accomplishment and to either of these ends there must be forethought, system, planning, intelligence, and honest purpose, as well as perspiration. Seeming to do is not doing.

Thomas Edison.

Thomas Edison's life overlapped with Carnegie's. As one of the world's most prolific inventors, his counterpoint is interesting, right? It's not about being busy per se. It's about being thoughtful about how, where and when you put in the effort.

For us to truly lead effectively today, we need a little more Edison and a little less Carnegie.

If you think about how you might tackle any complex issue, there are a few hard truths to acknowledge:

- There's no one right answer
- No one person will hold all the answers
- The issue will likely persist and evolve long after you're gone
- It's a fool's errand to try to determine a simple, linear cause and effect relationship
- Courses of action are best framed as experiments rather than sure-fire plans

What sort of leadership do we need here? A form that promotes clarity of thought, deep inquiry and real transparency. A form that brings people together to create a compelling shared purpose, to explore the issues, and then to design, run and learn from experiments. A form that doesn't confuse pace with progress. A form that plays the long game.

I call it unhurried leadership.

Unhurried is more a state of mind than a state of movement. It's first about quieting the mind rather than quieting our calendars. If we can operate from a mindset of clarity and calmness, rather than fogginess and frenziedness, it sets the tone for so many things:

- We see things as they are more clearly
- We discern what's important and what's really not
- We access greater creativity and connect more deeply to purpose
- We infect others with our calmness and clarity

Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.

Lao Tzu.

How to become a more unhurried leader?

This is a big topic. I have some thoughts, yet I first want to underline that our culture of busyness isn't going to go away by all of us suddenly adopting better habits. We're subject to systemic forces that need to be addressed with systemic solutions. Which is a topic for another post.

Yet there are definitely things you can do that can help you 'let the snow globe settle' and develop a little more zen while retaining the ability to make good things happen:

Practice ‘attention out’

fMRI studies show that when we focus our attention, with compassion, on other people, we dial down the ‘me’ brain (the one that’s focused on all the stuff you have to do) and our mind quiets. Start by choosing to truly listen to another. After all, leadership is really about bringing out the best in others, right?

Practice playing a longer game

The most effective leaders keep the long game in mind. When I’m clear on my larger sense of purpose, I can remind myself “it doesn’t all need to be done today”, and I immediately notice myself breathing out and becoming more present.

Practice patience

Find or create a mantra that helps you to slow down and allow things to unfold as they will. One that keeps me grounded is ‘slow is smooth, and smooth is fast.’

Practice creating white space

One of the most unhurried CEO’s I know has a really empty calendar. He deliberately creates white space to be able to think, and to respond to his peoples’ needs. He knows that his primary role is to be there for his people, and to do that, he can’t be busy all the time.

Unhurried leadership. It’s an ideal that many of us yearn for yet few accomplish. What might you do to make your leadership just that little less hurried?

Practice unhurried leadership.

Dial Down The Binary



***Chess works because the board is black and white.
Life works because our brains are black and white.
But wisdom lies in knowledge of the grey.***

Kevin Dutton

I've just been to Tasmania for a friend's 50th birthday. Three of us spent a few days in a motorhome travelling around, in part to visit a few different whiskey distilleries.

My friend loves whiskey.

Me? Not so much. I've never really taken to it, and over the years I've come to describe myself as a person who doesn't like whiskey.

Except, on this trip, that identity was challenged.

At each distillery we visited, we were given a 'flight' of four tasting glasses, each with a different whiskey in it. As I worked my way through the varieties, and the days, I found my identity as someone who doesn't like whiskey being challenged.

No, I didn't fall in love with whiskey. But I found myself appreciating some whiskeys more than others, and noticing more nuanced elements in their flavours that I'd never paid attention to before.

I used to think that all whiskeys were kind of alike and they were all, to me, yuck. Now I'm thinking that it's not as simple as that, and that I could perhaps even come to appreciate the occasional whiskey!

I'm no longer a person that 'doesn't like whiskey'. That's too simple. I'm a person who...well, it's hard. Someone who both recoils from it and is learning to enjoy it? Something like that.

The point? If I'm in binary-thinking mode (e.g. 'this is who I am') I shut down the possibilities for change ever happening. If I'm in spectrum-thinking mode ('I can take multiple perspectives here') the possibilities for change open up.

As I observe the world, I see a place that is leaning towards the binary. At the global level, the commentary on wars between Israel and Palestine, or Ukraine and Russia, tend to have a binary bias. One side good, the other side bad. It's increasingly the same in politics (40 countries have elections in 2024) I'm shuddering slightly as I think about how an over-reliance on binary thinking might shape the outcomes.

At a more immediate and personal level, I see time-pressed leaders leaning toward binary solutions. Organisational performance issue? A restructure will fix it. Team effectiveness issue? Get rid of the bad egg. That'll sort it.

When we lead with binary, we can show decisiveness. We can show we're getting on with it and taking action. It's often an ego-trip that's understandable, because we all have the need to be useful.

The world is not binary. The issues we face as leaders tend to be complex. They require us to:

Slow down:

Have the courage and structures that allow us to get off the rush-mill.

Listen for what's there.

Like a good whiskey, when we really pay attention, we can notice the subtleties. Inviting other people in to offer their perspectives is a smart play here.

Ask different questions.

"What's the answer?" is not usually the best place to start. "What's really going on?" And "What do we really want here?" are better places.

Experiment.

Think and act like a scientist. Try things with humility and curiosity to see what you can learn.

Loosen our identity.

This is the hard one. Are you prepared to let go of your identity just a little, and allow the possibilities that might exist on the other side of that to emerge?

Dial down the binary.

Cultivate Wisdom



***The saddest aspect of life right now is that
science gathers knowledge
faster than society gathers wisdom.***

Isaac Asimov

I'm teaching my youngest son to drive. Or rather, I'm helping him get the experience and wisdom that he needs to be able to pass his test!

Over the months that he's been practicing, I've seen his knowledge, skill and confidence soar. And his wisdom. He's increasingly able to make the right call in the moment in complex, fast-moving situations. It's impressive.

I'm also learning that as his driving has evolved, the way I mentor him has to evolve too. In the early days, it was fine to tell him what to do. In fact, it was essential. He soaked it up. Now, if I tell him what to do, I'll get a sharp rebuke and be told in no uncertain terms that he knows what he's doing. Which is true, mostly. I'm learning that, especially with the small errors he might make, it's wiser to keep quiet, and let him work it out for himself.

Wisdom. The 19th century theologian Charles Spurgeon called wisdom 'the right use of knowledge.' Jimi Hendrix noted that 'knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens'. Wisdom is using your experience to make the right call in the context you find yourself. My colleague Chris Miller is a little more grandiose. He calls it 'the truth that lifts humanity'. I love that.

While wisdom has always been in demand, I'm increasingly convinced that it's more valuable than ever. Why? Because when things get more complex, when change happens at a rapid clip, and there are no more easy answers, knowledge alone won't help us find the way forward. Wisdom will.

Take the massive uptake of ChatGPT. It's become easier and easier to access and shape the world's knowledge through large language models like this. Yet as I increasingly use it as a starting point for my research, it's clear to me that it's only a starting point. It might give me knowledge, but it won't give me nuance. That's where my own experience, as a human being who's lived a little, comes to the fore.

Another example: leading through change. This is all about stepping boldly and wisely into an unknown future. We might think we know what's going to happen, but we actually don't. We can't Gantt chart everything. The stuff we can't put in a project plan requires wisdom: making the right calls amidst the moral dilemmas that change inevitably brings. Not easy stuff.

Wisdom: Your value as a leader will only increase the more you cultivate it.

Cultivating Wisdom

To cultivate wisdom, you need a few key ingredients:

- A breadth of experience
- Experience over time
- A reflective practice
- Foresight

Let's break those down a little more:

Breadth of experience

When we face a complex situation that we've never encountered before, we could get flummoxed. Yet, if the details are new, the patterns may not be. If we've experienced a range of challenges in different environments, we're more likely to recognise the broader patterns at play in our current situation, and be able to discern a way forward.

Experience over time

It's not enough to have a load of one-off experiences in different domains. To have wisdom, you need to earn it through showing up time and time again. Take my son's driving. He didn't gain his skills, knowledge and confidence from just one go at it. He's gone time and time and time again, each time building up a little more perspective to help him begin to cultivate the seeds of wisdom that I'm seeing coming through now.

A reflective practice

You might have experience, but have you learned from it? The wisest people I know deliberately and regularly take time out to reflect, inquire, and learn from experience. They know how to slow down and practice being unhurried. That way, they're more easily able to discern the real insights that can be applied to new situations in the future.

Foresight

Wisdom requires the ability to consider the consequences and implications of your actions ahead of time. It means taking the time to consider different scenarios and look at them from multiple perspectives. It requires the humility and curiosity to know that you don't have the full picture, and the willingness to seek it out.

Everyday Practices

Over my years of working with thousands of leaders in a huge variety of different industries, one aspect stands out in those leaders who create an enduring impact: they are committed to cultivating wisdom. Not just being smart. Or getting stuff done. Or being great at presentations. They're committed to developing wisdom. Every day.

The next time you're faced with making a wise choice (and let's face it, that happens every day) here are three questions to ask yourself to help you make the right call:

- What could I do to look at this situation from another perspective?
- What's the choice that benefits the greater good (or, the longer term)?
- What would my 90-year old self suggest I consider here?

Cultivate wisdom.

Play The Long Game



Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.

Lao Tzu

A senior executive I know recently started a new job. During his first week, I sent him a message asking how it was going. His reply “Going OK. A bit shattered to be fair!” I replied, “Play the long game.” To which he replied “It’s the only one I know.”

His reply inspired me. For the years that I’ve known him, I’ve observed him lead and navigate gnarly, complex situations with outcomes that affect thousands, and sometimes millions, of people. He’s highly regarded for the excellent work he does. And I believe, in part, it’s because he plays the long game.

We’re at an interesting juncture in our history. We’re facing the collision of what appears to be an irresistible force heading directly towards an immovable object:

The irresistible force:

our collective focus on the short-term. From addictive social media and news cycles to short ‘what, is it that time again?’ three-year election cycles. We ‘cycle’ in low gear, putting in heaps of effort with not a lot of discernable progress.

The immovable object

the increasing complexity of the challenges we face asks us to take a long view if we’re to address them successfully. Short-term fixes typically result in more problems popping up all over the place.

For example, the desire to live in the manner to which we’ve become accustomed vs the pressing need to address climate change. Or, our love of a few drinks every evening vs. the realisation that if we want to live a long, healthy life, we’ll need to invest more into our fitness and health rather than partying.

What happens when the irresistible force meets the immovable object? I shudder to think.

We can’t beat ourselves up too much. As psychologist Dan Gilbert explains, the human brain evolved to serve us well in the short-term. Back in the day, we lived short lives and our primary concern was to survive, eat and mate. We’re simply not hard wired to be very good at taking the long view!

Yet, we need to learn to do so.

Here's a way to develop your ability to play the long game:

The Long Game Equation:

Purpose + Foresight + Wisdom

Ego

Let's break that down:

Purpose

How clear are you about why you're doing what you're doing? The greater your clarity and commitment to your longer-term 'why', the easier it will be for you to stay focused on that and ignore distractions. One Change Makers graduate decided his purpose was simply to 'make sustainability easy'. His career is now dedicated to realising that gnarly challenge, and he's having a potent impact in the organisations he chooses to work with.

Foresight

Foresight is less about the ability to predict what's going to happen. It's more about the ability to create multiple scenarios to imagine what could be possible. As I've written about before, we need to dial up our focus on possibilities and dial down our focus on problems. The more vividly we can create possible scenarios, the more creative action we have at our disposal.

Wisdom

When we exercise wisdom, we're making decisions that serve the long game. Do you eat the pie, or go for a bike ride? Your decision depends on your long game.

Ego

Ego is the great eroder of the long game. In our context, I'm defining ego as that part of us that's driven by an over-inflated sense of neediness. The need to please, the need to control, the need to be right, the need to be the hero.

For most of the first four decades of my life, I was driven by a need to please and to get approval. The fear of being disapproved of drove my choices for what I did or didn't do in the face of authority and power, and it limited me.

We all have ego needs. The question is: do you have them, or do they have you? If your ego needs overly dominate your decision making, then they have you. If you can acknowledge them and put them to one side, you can begin to act from a place of higher purpose, foresight and wisdom. You still have your needs, but they don't control what happens next.

The higher the ego need, the less we're able to play the long game, because our energy and efforts are directed towards meeting those needs first. The lower the ego need, the more we're able to transcend the impulse, and the more we're able to focus on purpose, foresight and wisdom.

When we choose to play the longer game, we can breathe out. Not everything has to be done today, or done perfectly, or even done at all. We can be less hurried, and more strategic about where we put our time and energy.

Leadership is less about the fires you put out. It's more about creating the future you want. When you play the long game, you give yourself a better chance of truly leading.

Play the long game.

Develop Dual Awareness



***We are not what we know
but what we are willing to learn.***

Mary Catherine Bateson

In a recent meeting, one participant in particular was being kind of unruly. He was taking up most of the airtime, talking over the top of people, and playing 'verbal tennis' with one of the other participants. All the while he appeared to be oblivious of the impact he was having on the vibe of the session.

Soon our time was up and everyone went their separate ways. From my perspective, it was a less-than-satisfactory experience. I felt that we'd missed a great opportunity for other participants to share their perspective. Their unheard voices could have contributed so much more to the conversation.

Does this situation sound familiar? I reckon we've all been there before. Maybe we've even been that unruly person!

So frustrating, right?

Meetings are at their most productive when everyone's fully present and engaged. Given that for most of us, our days are full of meetings, it's worthwhile finding ways to help us all contribute our best stuff. And at the very least, ensure we're not texting on our phones under the table, or railroading the conversation, or wondering what's for dinner.

Which leads me to the concept of Dual Awareness.

Awareness brings choice. The more acutely aware we are of what's going on in any given situation, the more choices we have for how we respond. The more choices we have, the more effective we can be.

Our effectiveness is directly correlated to our level of awareness.

The idea of Dual Awareness is that we're more effective when we have high awareness of both our internal environment and our external environment:

Internal environment

The stuff that's within our direct control. Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

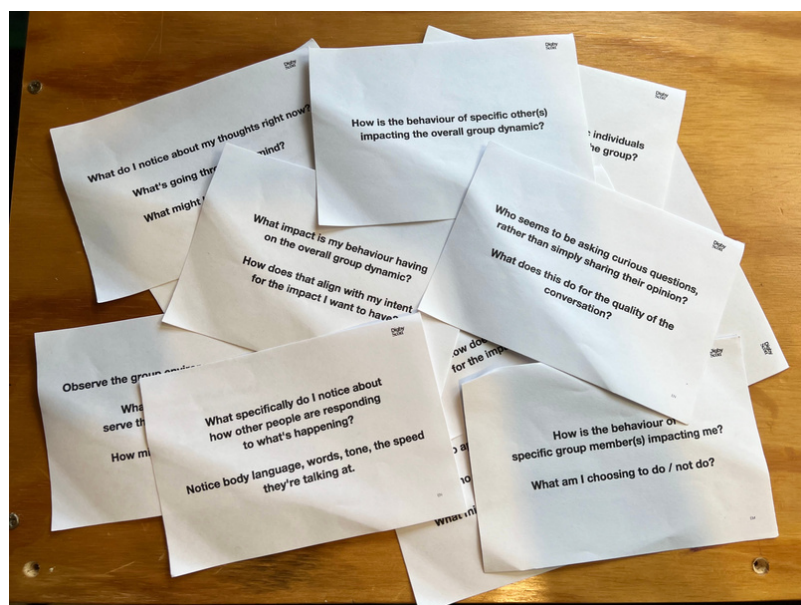
External environment

What's happening around us that we both influence and are influenced by.

The less aware we are (e.g. swept up in the moment and forgetting to notice the impact of how we're showing up), the less effective we'll be.

Cool concept. I first heard about it in [this article](#) from McKinsey. It's a good summary, yet it's light on the details on how to apply it.

So, as a practical person, I got to work. I created a deck of cards. I've designed them to help people dial up their dual awareness while in any conversation or meeting. I've begun to test them and the initial feedback has been really positive. One person said that she immediately became more present and engaged in the meeting just because of the card she was holding. That's got to be a good thing, right?



If you think your conversations and meetings could be more effective, or if you think you could be more effective in them, I think you'll like these cards.

They provide prompts to help you pay attention to something that's going on in the conversation. It might be something internal, or something external. Here are two example prompts:

What do I notice about my behaviour right now? (Internal)

How would I describe the vibe of this meeting right now? (External)

By simply having a card like this to pay attention to while you're in the meeting, you'll automatically become more present.

Here are three ways you can use the cards:

Solo

Pick a card for your day and pay attention to it in all interactions you have.

Pair

Buddy up with someone for the day. Each pick a card for your day. At the end of your day, share what you noticed.

Group

Use them in a group session with everyone choosing a card to pay attention to.

As you can see from the photo, the cards are very much in 'test mode'. I'm keen to have as many people as possible try them and provide feedback so I can refine them and share them with the wider world. If you're keen to play, just download the cards and supporting resources.

Regardless, I hope this idea has got you thinking about how you can dial up your own awareness and presence. As Socrates said, know thyself. It's a lifelong mission that starts with observing yourself, inside and out.

Develop dual awareness.

Download the cards here:



Embody Your Message



THIS IS
THE SIGN
YOU'VE BEEN
LOOKING FOR

*Authenticity is a collection of choices
that we have to make every day.*

Brene Brown

Back in late 2022, when I announced I was taking a ‘delivery sabbatical’, I explained that I wasn’t burned out, and I wasn’t bored. In retrospect, I reckon that one of those statements wasn’t wholly true!

Looking back, I was a bit bored. By ‘bored’, I actually mean ‘disconnected’. Disconnected from my own sense of purpose. Yes, I could say what I stood for (creating a connected world of leaders and change-makers) but I’d lost some of the fire in my belly. I couldn’t feel it like I used to. Yes, I was still doing good work. But the drive wasn’t there like before. If I was going to stay motivated, and ultimately credible, something needed to change.

Cue the sabbatical. Fast forward to the outcome: the fire is back! Taking the time to stop and listen helped me reconnect with my sense of purpose. The sabbatical wasn’t so much of a process of reinvention as it was a process of reconnection.

The brilliant author Parker J Palmer sums it up this way:

“Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”

It’s like shaking up a snow globe and allowing the flakes to settle. You can see what’s there more clearly. What’s there for me is a conviction for shaping leadership with depth. More than ever.

It’s likely that you’ve sat through a presentation from a senior leader whose message remains unconvincing. They’re saying the words, but their body tells a different story. Nothing really changes but the hands on the clock.

I’m hoping that you’ve also experienced a different form of leadership. Leadership that embodies the message. You don’t just hear it, you feel it. You leave with your body tingling and your mind buzzing. You feel more empowered, more engaged, more alive.

People who lead like this don't need a script. They don't need PowerPoint. They embody their message, and you feel it. That's what matters. It matters because we need leadership that inspires us to contribute to a bigger purpose.

Some examples from the global stage, and the messages they embody:

Malala Yousafzai: education, empowerment, and courage.

Nelson Mandela: equality, justice, and forgiveness.

Oprah Winfrey: empathy, compassion, and philanthropy.

Mahatma Gandhi: nonviolence, self-reliance, and peaceful resistance.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg: fairness, equality, and justice.

In my work over the years helping leaders develop their authentic leadership style, I've noticed that the ones who grow the most are the ones who prioritise reflection time and use it well.

When we slow down, we create the conditions to hear the voice that tells us what we're really about. It's from this place that true leadership comes from.

People feel purpose. They can feel it when you're living it. And they can feel it when you're not.

If you want to ignite the collective brilliance of others, you first need to do the work to connect with what you stand for and embody your message. What do you stand for? How do others experience it?

Embody your message.

Develop Dialogue Skills



Dialogue

In true dialogue, both sides are willing to change.

Nhat Hanh

In an earlier chapter, we've looked at how pursuing simplicity is one of the core practices of leadership. Simplicity removes friction and helps us keep moving. Yet simplicity has its limits. Pursuing simplicity is one thing. Being simplistic is another.

Take people. We love to give people, including ourselves, labels. "She's a bully." "He's really narrow minded." "I'm the CEO." All simplistic attempts to put people in a box so we don't have to think too hard about the complexity that actually exists.

Yet people are complex. As Anand Giridharadas, author of *The Persuaders*, shows us, most people are a set of internal contradictions. No-one is simply what they seem to be.

Honour Complexity

During a recent trip to Europe, I met with a number of senior leaders to discuss their leadership and culture challenges. One of the common themes was the challenge of creating inclusive cultures. It's well documented that when we embrace diversity and create cultures of high inclusion, people thrive and performance boosts. Yet, as one head of organisational performance put it, "We're doing all of this work to raise awareness of the importance of inclusion, yet it's hard to get people to even come to the starting line."

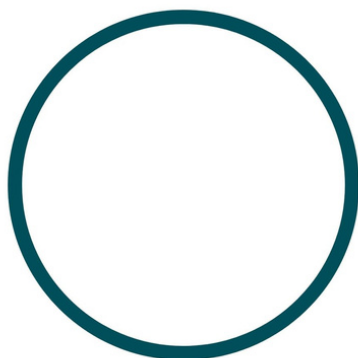
That got me thinking. What would leadership need to look like to realise the promise of inclusion?

Then I thought a little more. It's not only inclusion that's the challenge. In complex environments, the ones who succeed are the ones who master the art of bringing people together to solve complex problems. Those leaders master the art of creating the conditions that shape a shared awareness of reality. This form of leadership doesn't just pursue simplicity. It honours complexity.

One of the activities that I use the most in my leadership workshops is called Cone in the Box. It's a way of helping people see that when it comes to complex problems, there's no one 'right' perspective. We need to invite multiple perspectives to see the whole.

Here's the activity:

What's this?



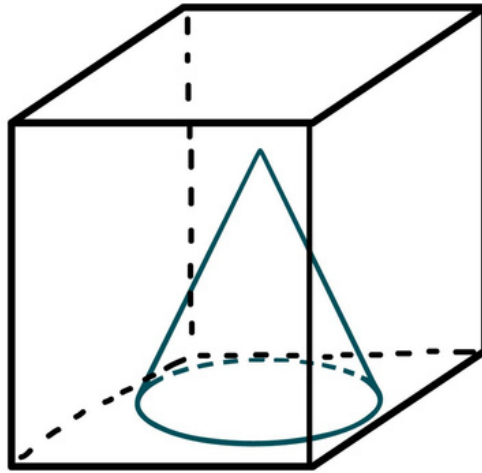
Let's say it's a circle.

Now, what's this?

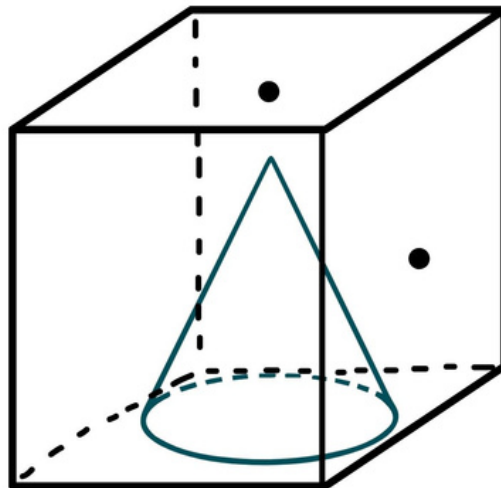


Let's go with 'triangle'.

Now, imagine there's a box with a cone inside it:



Here's the thing. You don't know what's inside the box, and you want to find out. However you can't find a way to open the box. So you get resourceful and drill a couple of very small holes. One in the top of the box and another holes in one of the sides. They're just enough to peek through.



What shape would you say you saw if you looked in from the top? It's likely you'd say 'a circle'.

What shape would you say you saw if you looked in from the side? It's likely you'd say 'a triangle'.

Which perspective is the right one? Wrong question. We need at least two perspectives to give us an idea of the reality of the situation.

Dialogue

What does it take to help people to see multiple perspectives? Here's one powerful tool that I reckon all leaders need to master: dialogue.

Dialogue is a word that often gets bandied around yet too few truly live it. Having a dialogue is different to having a discussion or a debate. The root of the word gives us a clue: 'meaning flowing through'. Dialogue is the process of sharing and seeking to understand the multiple perspectives that exist in a group so we can better create a collective sense of meaning around an issue. Quite simply, it helps to reveal the cone in the box.

Dialogue involves two core practices: advocacy and inquiry.

Advocacy:

Sharing your perspective on and beliefs about the issue at hand. It requires the humility to know (and show) that your perspective is limited, and the willingness to have your assumptions challenged.

Inquiry:

Truly seeking to understand and learn from another's perspective. It requires the willingness to suspend your own beliefs, the heart to listen deeply, and the ability to ask truly open questions in order for everyone to learn.

Dialogue is not about:

- the best idea wins
- playing the 'I'm being reasonable, you're being unreasonable' game
- interrogation dressed up as curiosity
- giving everyone a voice just so you can 'tick the box'

As leaders, we navigate complex issues every day. To navigate more successfully, we're wise to bring people together in dialogue so we can co-create shared awareness and collective solutions. In cultures where speed trumps substance, and ego-systems trump ecosystems, this can be a real challenge.

Dialogue requires everyone present to transcend their own ego for the greater good. It's also time-consuming and challenging. Yet, the reason we form organisations is to bring people together to create something that we can't do alone. If we want to realise the potential that exists, we need to master the art of facilitating dialogue.

Develop dialogue skills.

Create The Conditions



***You cannot create results.
You can only create conditions
in which something might happen.***

Anne Bogart

Last weekend I went to a show at the Wellington Comedy Festival. As the comedian began, she invited the audience to help make it an awesome show. She said that she wanted us to contribute to the experience, not just to sit back and expect to be entertained. And guess what? The show was a hoot!

Why? I reckon it's because she first and foremost saw herself as the host of the audience, not simply the hero on the stage. She created the right conditions for us to get what we came for: to feel good!

Create the conditions. How can this idea apply at work?

Here's one way: in times of change and uncertainty, we tell ourselves that people need information. That's true, yet what my clients tell me that they actually yearn for is the space and time to make sense of things, and to be involved in the unfolding process.

Don't just fire off more comms, or do endless 'talking head' roadshows with jam-packed, 20-bullets-per-page slides. That's like pointing a firehose at me when all I needed was a drink of water.

Instead, create the space for me to engage with the information. Give me the space to talk about it, explore it and reflect on it. Invite me into the conversation and help me shape it. That's what I need.

In other words, go beyond merely information. Give me a deftly crafted experience that blends information, conversation and reflection

As Priya Parker, the author of *The Art of Gathering*, says: "Reverse engineer an outcome: Think of what you want to be different because you gathered, and work backward from that outcome."

Hero vs. Host

All too often, I see leaders wearing the 'hero' hat. That's the hat we wear when we tell ourselves "It's on me to provide the answers, the direction, and the confidence that people need." I see it particularly with people newer to leadership, where cultural conditioning and role modelling has taught us that this is what it means to lead.

When we wear the hero hat, we talk at people and do presentations to them. And we expect people to be clear, satisfied and motivated!

Instead, what if we wore the 'host' hat? That's the hat we wear when we tell ourselves "It's my job to create the conditions for us to get the outcome we need."

The host brings people together. They create the conditions for people to do the work that's needed. That work might be sense-making, or it might be decision-making. Or maybe it's simply connecting with each other.

What's clear is that in our ever-hurried world, people value space to slow down. To connect. To think.

Enlightened leaders know this, and they know how to create the conditions for it.

They channel the wisdom of the philosopher Lao Tzu: "The best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say 'We have done this ourselves.'"

The hero puts themselves at the centre. The host puts the outcome at the centre, and invites people to play their part in creating that outcome.

It's not all about you. And it's not all on you.

People don't need your expertise. They want an experience that they can be a part of. Set up the experience, and then get out of the way so people can do the work they need to do together.

Dial Up Your Host

How do you dial down your hero and dial up your host?

We know you're wearing the host hat when:

- You're OK with saying 'I don't know'
- You invite us to shape ideas with you, not show us a finished idea
- You ask more questions than you provide answers
- You listen more than you talk
- You put significant time into thinking about the outcomes you want to see, and the conditions that will enable that.

Here's a question to ask yourself in any meeting or conversation: what hat can I wear that will best serve the outcome we need here?

Create the conditions.

Champion Learning



***If history repeats itself,
and the unexpected always happens,
how incapable must man be
of learning from experience.***

George Bernard Shaw

During the most intense 18 months of the Covid pandemic, I worked with the executive leadership team of New Zealand's Ministry of Health as they navigated uncharted territory. Every couple of months, we met for a half-day to take time out from the craziness of their day to day experiences. The purpose? To create the space to connect, and to learn.

This wasn't a training course. They didn't need that. For them to continually adapt to their context, and to stay antifragile, they needed the space to make sense of, and learn from, what they had been experiencing.

It's fair to say that, all things considered, they did a stellar job. From where I sat, it's not just because of the talent around the table. It's because they deliberately invested in learning from experience.

Covid threw us a curveball. You'll experience your own curve balls every day. And they'll keep coming. If we're going to successfully evolve our careers, our teams and our organisations, we need to know how to learn. The difference between change happening to us, and change happening with us, is how well, and how fast, we learn.

Need a couple of other reasons why this idea is important? Here you go:

If you're born today, you've got more than a 50% chance of living to 100. That's a long life. For it to be a meaningful, interesting life, you'll need to learn how to continually upgrade your skills and, from time to time, reinvent yourself.

If you hire or manage people, you'll know that they're increasingly hungry to grow. Beyond the desire for a sense of belonging, and meaningful work, people are more likely to be engaged and choose to stay when they feel like they're learning.

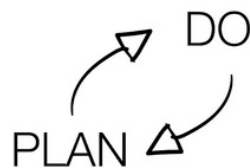
You might be thinking "sure Digby, but we don't have the time or the budget for sending people on training courses." To which I reply "Cool, you don't have to."

How We Learn

Most of our learning opportunities are right in front of us. They're called 'experiences'. When we take action, we create the opportunity to learn from that action and its impact. We do.

DO

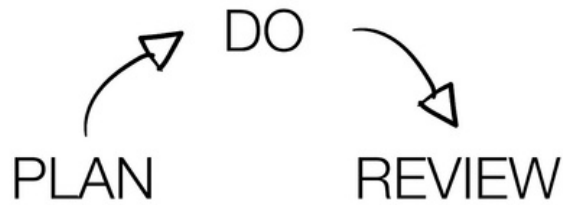
Yet most of the time, we don't. We do the thing, and then we move onto the next thing. Often, we'll plan the things to do, so we don't have to keep stopping and ask 'what's next?'. We just go onto the next thing.



We create a cycle of 'Plan, Do, Plan, Do, Plan, Do'. Sound familiar? After a while, it's exhausting.

There's no chance for learning in that cycle. We need to break the pattern.

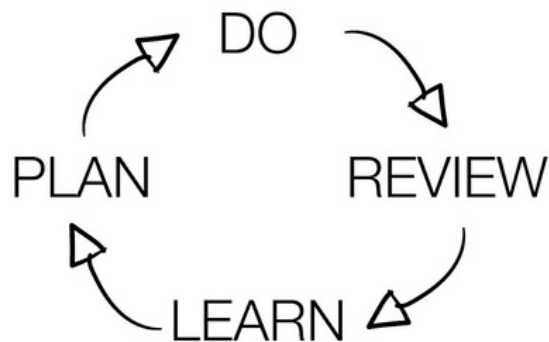
Here's what that looks like:



When we take a little time after the do to review, we create the opportunity to make sense of things. We get to ask questions like “What impact did that have?” “Do we have evidence or are we just making it up?” “What surprised us?”

But wait, there's more. To make the experience valuable, we need to learn from it. That's where we ask “What have we learned here?” “What assumptions might we want to test?” “How can we put these insights into action?”

And we create this cycle. This is how we learn:



How To Champion Learning

As an enlightened leader, don't just champion delivery. Champion discovery too. Help your people go right through the learning cycle as often as possible.

Some useful tips to become a learning champion:

- Create the conditions: don't be the hero, be the host
- Connect people: help people learn from each others' experiences
- Ask good questions. The questions above are great thought-starters. Here are some more
- Role model it: Share what you're learning every day

It's Your Choice

You have a choice. You can go along just pumping stuff out so you can say you've achieved something. Or you can champion learning. Delivery without discovery, at best, just maintains the status quo. Delivery and discovery creates something better.

Champion learning.



Digby Scott

digbyscott.com