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THE REAL LEADER
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The Real Leader: Beyond the Mainstream Expectations of Our Times

A grounded reflection on leadership from the front lines of coaching & personal experience.

Introduction: Who is this for?

This isn't another glossy leadership playbook filled with buzzwords, diagrams, and empty inspiration. This is a reality check for people who are already in the arena: leading, building, delivering, falling down, getting up again.

If you're a CEO, elite performer, team captain, or someone others naturally orbit—this is your mirror.

It's a guide for the ones who didn't ask to be leaders, but became them. Those who didn't follow a "vision board," but instead had to lead during 2 am board crises, locker room losses, or moments of sheer personal doubt.

It's a guide rooted in two things:

- First-hand leadership experience
- A decade of deep, unfiltered coaching with over 100 high-stakes leaders

"Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others."

— Jack Welch

Defining Leadership: Between necessity and intention

Leadership isn't always a calling. Sometimes, it's a collision between who you are and what reality demands.

From managing a 3-person team to leading 50+ people across continents, the path hasn't been glamorous. It's been gritty. And from those trenches, one lived definition of leadership emerges:

“The ability to form a position, define a goal, and make others work toward that aim effectively.”

Academic definitions echo the same principle:

- Leadership is “persuading people to set aside their self-interest and work toward a collective goal.”
— *Hogan & Kaiser, 2005*
- “Leadership involves direction, influence, and purpose.”
— *Avolio et al., 2003*

But here's the tension: in most corporate or competitive environments, the “collective good” is often replaced by shareholder targets, prestige, or personal ambition.

Translation: You can be a “good” leader and still have selfish goals. The two aren't mutually exclusive.

“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.”

— **John C. Maxwell**

Myth #1: Optimal Leadership Doesn't Exist

Let's get real. There is no single “optimal” way to lead.

Depending on your personality, context, culture, and goal—leadership looks radically different. In our coaching experience, we've seen effective leaders who:

- Use compensation as a carrot.
- Lean into consensus and empathy.
- Drive performance through authority.
- Inspire with sheer conviction (and few facts).
- Delegate deeply, or micro-manage the battlefield.

- Influence through charisma, presence, or political finesse.

Trying to conform to the textbook idea of “optimal” leadership—a magical mix of empathy, vision, and communication—sets real leaders up for failure.

Not because those things are wrong, but because they are incomplete.

“The worst thing you can do as a leader is pretend to be someone you’re not.”

— Howard Schultz

The Modern Leadership Dilemma

Here’s what real leaders confess in coaching rooms:

- “I feel like a therapist, not a strategist.”
- “I’m constantly hand-holding my team.”
- “I’ve become the emotional airbag of the company.”
- “Where’s the space for my own focus and growth?”

Modern leadership has glorified **empathy** to the point of burnout. It’s created a false binary: if you’re not emotionally available 24/7, you’re not leadership material.

This dynamic is especially punishing for introverted leaders, deep thinkers, or domain specialists.

Empathy is essential, but direction is non-negotiable.

Leadership isn’t just about nurturing people. It’s about taking them somewhere. Looking forward—not just around.

“If everything is important, then nothing is.”

— Patrick Lencioni

Myth #2: Success is Not Universal

What counts as “success” in leadership?

That depends entirely on **your values**—and whether they align with the people around you.

Values form the bedrock of influence. Not charisma. Not even results.

You don't lead people. You lead values.

Look at some cultural icons:

- **The Kardashians:** Emblematic of money, fame, and visibility
- **Jordan Peterson:** Order, masculinity, traditionalism
- **Donald Trump:** Directness, nationalism, provocation
- **Måneskin:** Freedom, rebellion, creative fluidity

They lead not because of universal appeal, but because of tribal resonance.

If your values clash with your organization's or industry's, your leadership will be a battle, possibly a futile one.

The Key Question: Can you Lead Without Alignment?

Short answer? **No.**

You can be brilliant, empathetic, strategic, and still fail as a leader if your values don't sync with your environment.

That's why so many visionaries are only understood posthumously. Their timing was off. The context didn't match.

You can fight to change your environment—or you can adapt to lead in it.

Both are valid. Just don't confuse one for the other.

Strategic Leadership Starts with Radical Self-Awareness

If you want to lead in the here and now, here's your strategy:

1. Name your core values.

E.g., "Bravery", "Discipline", "Freedom", "Humility", "Service", "Truth", "Expertise"

2. Scan your environment.

Ask: "Do others around me hold these values too?" If not, stop trying to impose yours.

3. Choose: Adapt or Exit.

Leadership isn't martyrdom. It's a strategy. If the cost of adaptation is too high, change the game—or leave it.

Adaptation doesn't mean inauthenticity. It means understanding influence. Sometimes it means speaking up. Other times, shutting up.

Final Words: The Unglamorous Truth

Leadership is lonely. It's uncertain. And sometimes, it's utterly thankless.

But the good news?

You don't have to be a perfect leader. You just have to be a real one.

The world doesn't need another influencer. It needs grounded, conscious, values-driven humans who are willing to do the hard thing.

And remember:

- If you're consistently celebrated, you're probably not pushing against anything.
- If you're consistently criticized, you might be ahead of your time.

The job is not to please. It's to build, decide, and hold the line where others wobble.

Your Leadership Checklist

- I know what I stand for
- I've taken the pulse of those I lead
- I've made a conscious choice to adapt—or not
- I lead from values, not trends
- I'm okay with being misunderstood

Closing Thought

“A good leader knows how to be and how it feels to be a good follower,

and takes that into account when leading others.”

— ILC Coaching Team

Need to take your leadership to the next level?

Let's talk. Not because you're failing, but because you're done pretending.