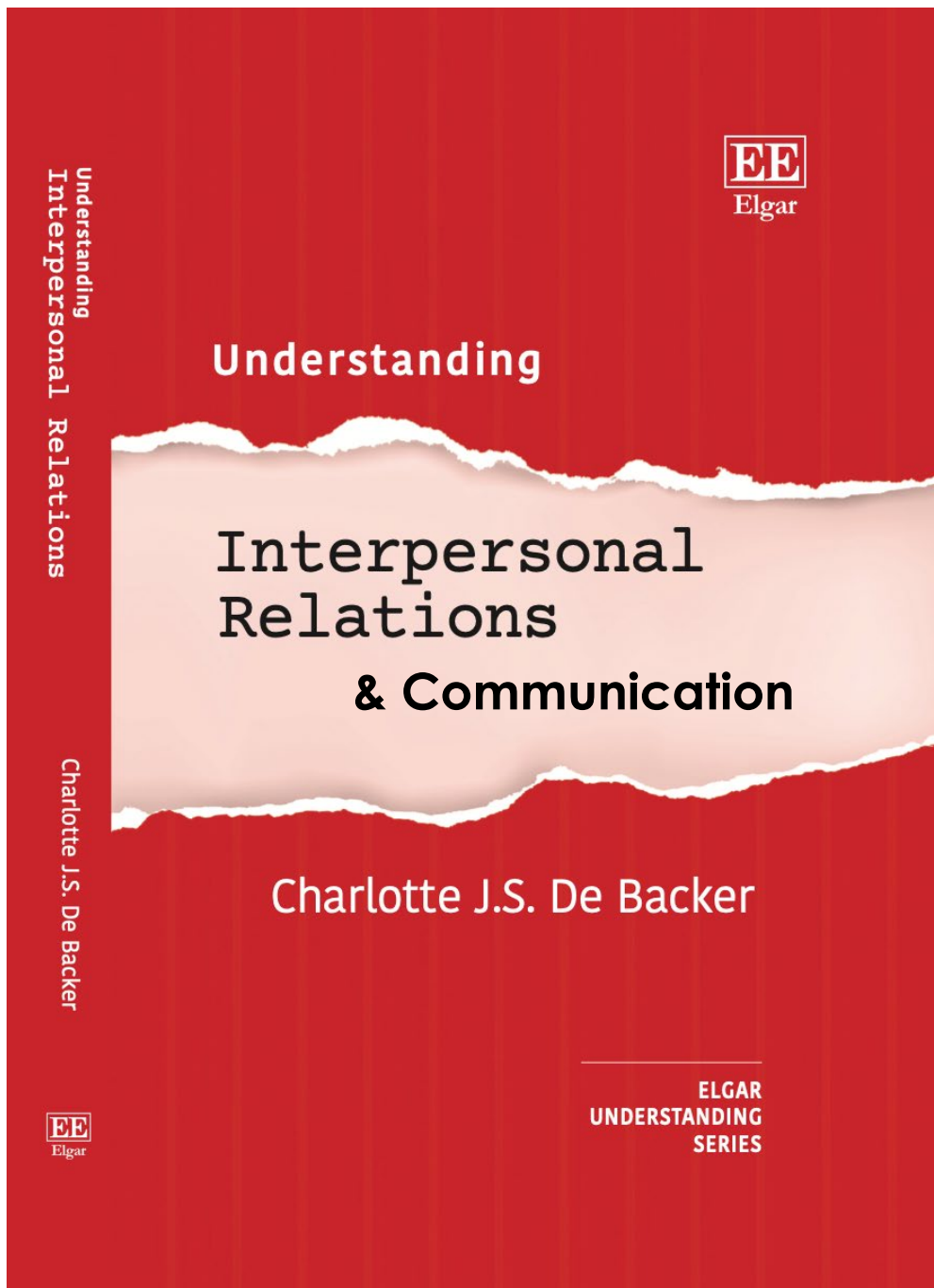


REACH ME AT
CHARLOTTE.DEBACKER@UANTWERPEN.BE

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Leading Without Losing Yourself or Others in the
Academic World

DR. CHARLOTTE DE BACKER
UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP



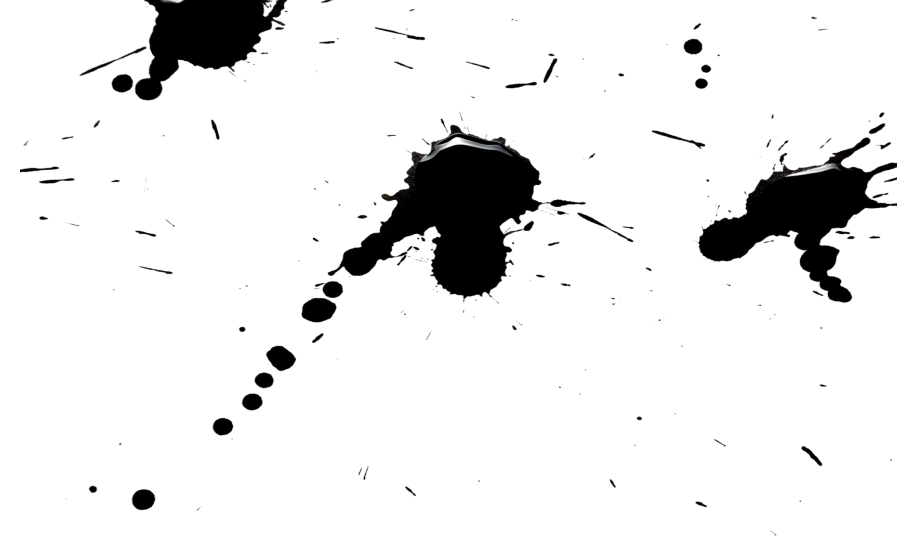
Interpersonal (& Intercultural)
Communication BA/MA

Internal Communication MA
(coaching)

Interactional Coach (almost)



EDUCATIEVE
ACADEMIE vzw



Every person is, in a sense, **the leader** of a small coalition of internal voices, needs, and goals.

SCRIPT

The internalized narrative—often shaped in childhood—that guides a person's beliefs, behaviors, and expectations throughout life.

DIRECTOR



GOAL

A deeply meaningful aspiration or desired outcome that gives direction, purpose, and motivation to a person's life choices and actions.

Life is a stage. The more we know how to direct ourselves, the better we interact with the outside world

INNER
AUDIENCE



ACTOR



OTHERS
AROUND
US -
EXTERNAL



PROCES

The deeper emotional layers beneath the surface—often hidden, neglected, or painful—including unprocessed emotions, shadow parts, and potentially trauma.

NOT for coaching



LEADERSHIP is MULTIDIMENSIONAL

From the perspective of the
leaders

From the perspective of the
followers



LEADERSHIP

From the perspective of the
leaders





DOMINANCE vs. PRESTIGE



ELSEVIER

Evolution and Human Behavior 22 (2001) 165–196

Evolution
and Human
Behavior

The evolution of prestige Freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission

Joseph Henrich^{a,*}, Francisco J. Gil-White^b

^aUniversity of Michigan Business School, 701 Tappan Drive, D3276, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1234, USA

^bDepartment of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania, 3815 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6196, USA

Received 5 December 1999; accepted 15 November 2000

Abstract

This paper advances an “information goods” theory that explains *prestige* processes as an emergent product of psychological adaptations that evolved to improve the quality of information acquired via cultural transmission. Natural selection favored social learners who could evaluate potential models and copy the most successful among them. In order to improve the fidelity and comprehensiveness of such ranked-biased copying, social learners further evolved dispositions to sycophantically ingratiate themselves with their chosen models, so as to gain close proximity to, and prolonged interaction with, these models. Once common, these dispositions created, at the group level, distributions of deference that new entrants may adaptively exploit to decide who to begin copying. This generated a preference for models who seem generally “popular.” Building on social exchange theories, we argue that a wider range of phenomena associated with prestige processes can more plausibly be explained by this simple theory than by others, and we test its predictions with data from throughout the social sciences. In addition, we distinguish carefully between *dominance* (force or force threat) and *prestige* (freely conferred deference). © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Status; Prestige; Prestige-biased transmission; Cultural transmission; Social learning; Dual inheritance theory

Dominance or Prestige

Prestige hierarchies are domain-specific

Prestige-based leadership is based on relationships rather than authority

Prestige-based leadership empowers people



EMPOWERMENT

COMPETENCE

Employees who feel competent believe in their work-related skills and are convinced that they can perform well in their jobs.

I can do it

MEANING

Employees with high meaning perceptions identify with the goals of their job, meaning their ideals and standards match the values necessary to execute the job

I want to do it

SELF- DETERMINATION

The perceived level of choice in initiating and regulating one's own actions at work

I choose to do it

IMPACT

The belief of having the power to influence administrative, strategic, and operative goals at work.

What I do has an impact

Article

Leadership Styles and Psychological Empowerment: A Meta-Analysis

Carsten C. Schermuly ¹, Laura Creon¹, Philipp Gerlach², Carolin Graßmann³, and Jan Koch¹

Abstract

Psychological empowerment has become a popular construct in organizational research and practice. Leadership ranks high among the best predictors of employees' psychological empowerment, yet little is known about which leadership styles prove more effective than others. This meta-analysis investigates the effects of four leadership styles on psychological empowerment. More specifically, we test whether empowering leadership evokes more psychological empowerment than transformational leadership, servant leadership, or transactional leadership. We found that empowering, transformational and servant leadership contribute almost equally to psychological empowerment. No relationship was found with transactional leadership. In an explorative manner, we tested the effects on the different dimensions of psychological empowerment. We found that the leadership styles had a weaker influence on the competence dimension of psychological empowerment. We also investigated the effects of several moderators on the relationships with psychological empowerment: country culture (power balanced freedom (PBF)), study design (cross-sectional vs. multi-wave studies) and publication status (published vs. unpublished). We found no moderating effects of culture, which indicates the universally empowering effects of the leadership styles. The relationships between leadership and empowerment were somewhat weaker when data were collected at different measurement points, and publication bias does not seem to be an issue in this research field.



EMPOWERMENT

COMPETENCE

Employees who feel confident, believe in their work-relevant abilities, and are convinced that they can perform well in their job.

MEANING

Employees with high need for meaning perceive their job as meaningful when their perceptions identify work standards that match the values necessary to execute the job.

SELF-DETERMINATION

The perceived level of autonomy in initiating and regulating actions at work.

IMPACT

The belief of having the ability to influence administrative and operative goals at work.

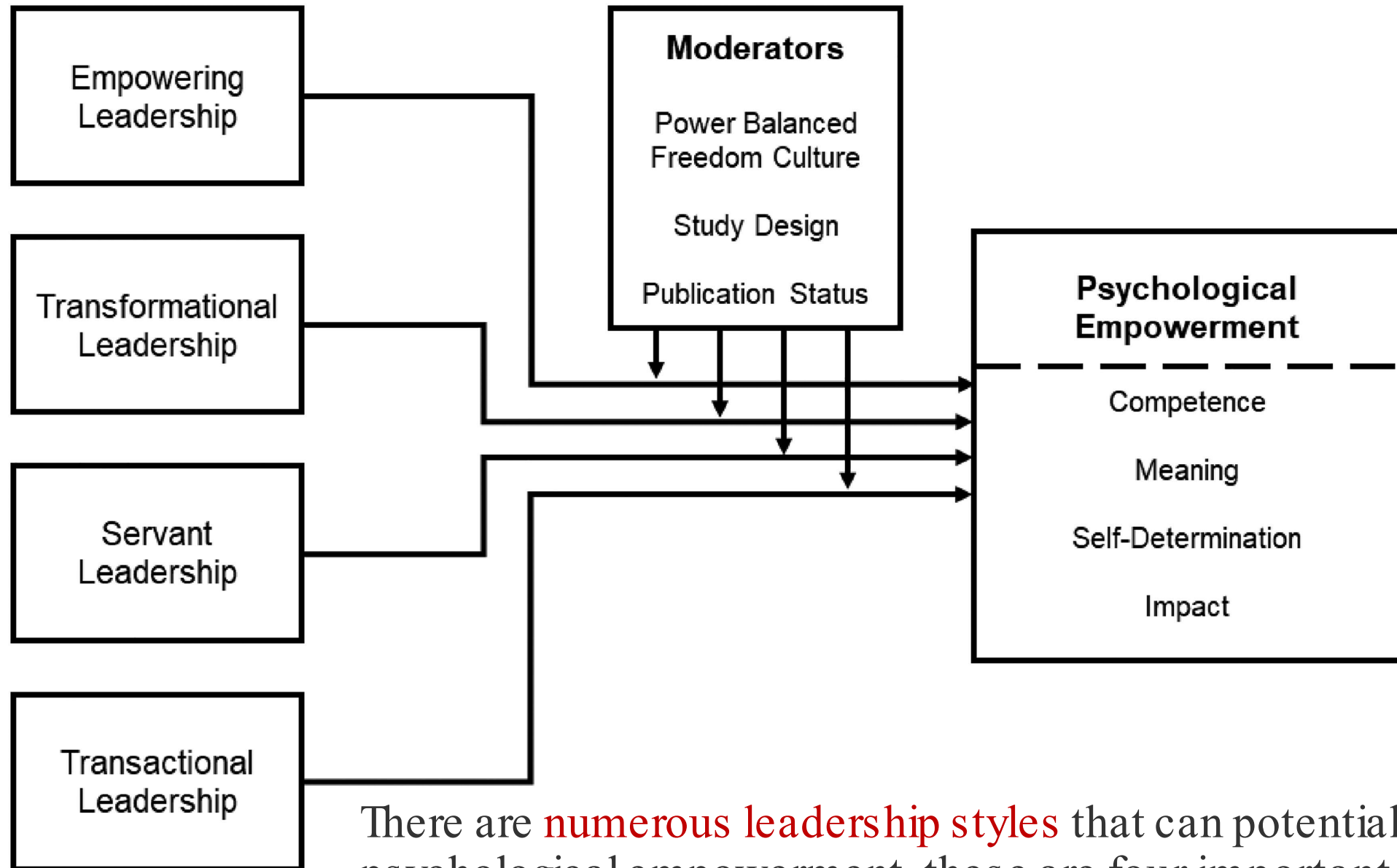
Article

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There are **numerous leadership styles** that can potentially impact psychological empowerment, these are four important ones



Empowering Leadership

TRUST

PEOPLE

Encourages initiative & responsibility.
Supports learning & risk-taking.

✓ Fosters **self-confidence** and independence.
✓ Leads to higher job satisfaction & creativity.

✗ Some employees **may feel overwhelmed without guidance**.
✗ May lead to inconsistencies if not balanced with accountability.

Transformational Leadership

INSPIRE

PEOPLE

Inspirational - Creates a compelling vision.
Idealized influence – leader = role model.
Intellectual stimulation
Individualized consideration

✓ Increases **innovation**.
✓ Ideal **for change**
✓ Enhances psychological empowerment by aligning work goals with personal values.

✗ Dependent on leader charisma.
✗ Lack of structure **may leave employees uncertain**.
✗ Difficult to measure effectiveness (subjective impact).

Servant Leadership

SUPPORT

PEOPLE

Focuses on **empathy and support**.
Leads by **serving** rather than directing.

✓ Builds **trust, loyalty**, and collaboration.
✓ Enhances employee **wellbeing, satisfaction and ethical culture**.

✗ Can be **slow in decision-making**.
✗ May **not work well in high-pressure, fast-moving industries**.

Transactional Leadership

REWARD

PEOPLE

Clear **expectations & goals**.
Rewards for performance.
Corrective actions for mistakes.

✓ Provides **stability**, efficiency, and accountability.
✓ Works well in **structured environments**.

✗ Less emphasis on personal growth & motivation.
✗ Employees **may feel controlled** rather than empowered.

LEADERSHIP

From the perspective of the
leaders

From the perspective of the
followers



LEADERSHIP

From the perspective of the
followers





FOLLOWERSHIP THEORY

What do people want from leaders?
And why does that change?

The same person who wants a
strong protective leader during crisis
may later prefer someone who is
fair, visionary, or emotionally
supportive

This paper argues that humans
possess an evolved **followership
psychology**: we follow leaders who
meet specific psychological needs.



[Journal Information](#)
[Journal TOC](#)

APA PsycArticles: Journal Article

The psychology of following: Conceptualizing and validating the Fundamental Follower Needs Inventory.

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Sheng, X., Andrews, W., & van Vugt, M. (2026). The psychology of following: Conceptualizing and validating the Fundamental Follower Needs Inventory. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 111(6), 768–801. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001347>

Humans possess an evolved followership psychology that enables them to identify and endorse different types of leaders depending on situational demands. But what fundamental needs guide these follower endorsements? Across a preliminary study and five validation studies ($N = 3,514$), we developed and validated the Fundamental Follower Needs Inventory (FFNI)—a psychometrically robust measure that identifies six core follower needs: *protection*, *affiliation*, *status*, *guidance* (including *vision* and *expertise*), and *fairness*. In Studies 1 and 2, we conducted content validation, tested reliability, and confirmed the factor structure of the FFNI across three domains (general, political, and workplace), three countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and China), and multiple time points. Study 3 demonstrated FFNI's convergent and discriminant validity. Studies 4 and 5 explored the nomological network, examining its antecedents, consequences, and both predictive and incremental validity. The FFNI provides a novel tool for researchers to investigate how follower needs vary across contexts and cultures and how these needs shape leader endorsements and perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Practically, the FFNI offers leaders a framework to better understand and respond to the psychological needs of those they lead. (PsycInfo Database Record (c) 2026 APA, all rights reserved)



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Current Opinion in
Psychology

The triad model of follower needs: theory and review

Wendy de Waal-Andrews and Mark van Vugt

Humans have an evolved flexible followership psychology that enables them to select different leaders in different contexts, depending on their needs. We distinguish a triad of follower needs: (i) guidance into a shared direction, (ii) active protection against threats, and (iii) judicious dispute settlement. These needs relate to critical group coordination challenges described in biology and anthropology and to different evolutionary leadership theories. We describe the contexts, in which these needs emerge, the characteristics of leaders who meet these needs, and the potential risks of following these leaders. We end by discussing the potential of our theory to aid the understanding of leadership in modern organizations, female leadership, leader manipulation of needs, and individual differences between followers.

Address

Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology & Institute for Brain and Behavior Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding author: van Vugt, Mark (m.van.vugt@vu.nl)

globalization, fueled support for Trump in 2016 [6], pointing at the need for a strong leader who could protect citizens from various threats. Finally, amid mass-protests following the murder of a journalist investigating political corruption [2], Caputova's call to 'fight evil' and her track-record as a lawyer met her voters' need for a leader who could settle disputes and bring justice [cf. 7].

These diverse follower needs tie into different adaptive problems faced by our ancestors in the course of human evolution, and that are still evident in both small-scale human societies and non-human societies [8–10]. Guidance into a shared direction is important in group movement, active protection against threats in aggressive between-group conflicts, and judicious dispute settlement in managing intra-group conflict (e.g. food sharing). These needs also align with the three leadership functions ('sorts of power'), distinguished by Montesquieu [11, p. 198], with guidance into a shared direction relating to the power to 'enact, amend or abrogate laws', active protection to the power to



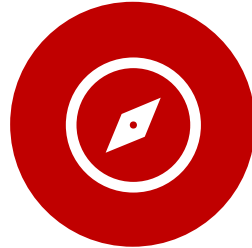
FOLLOWERSHIP THEORY



Protection

Keep me safe

Threats, danger,
insecurity,
uncertainty



Guidance

**Show me where
to go**

Direction,
meaning,
purpose



Fairness

**Treat people
justly**

Conflict
management,
equality, morality



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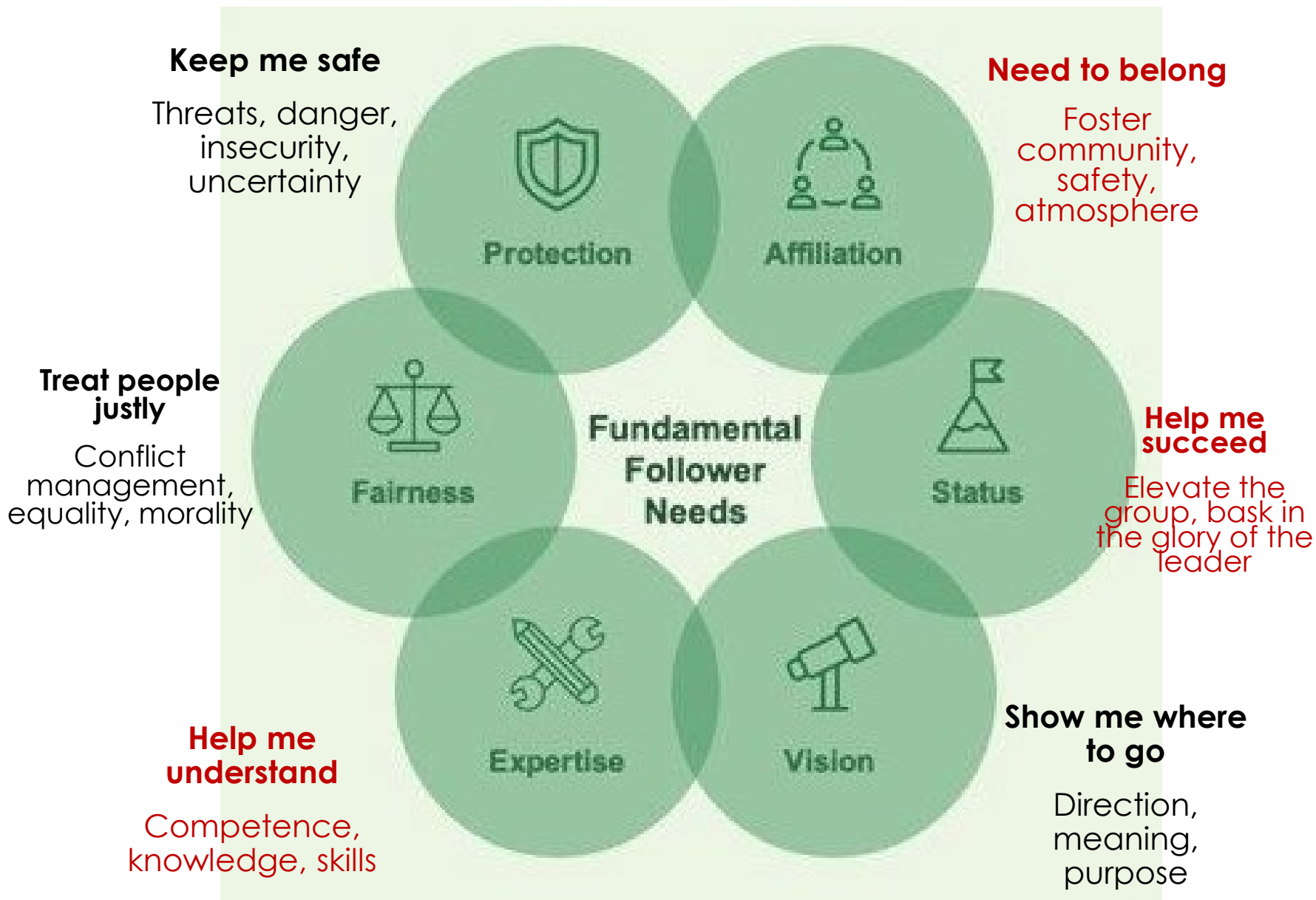
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[Journal Information](#)
[Journal TOC](#)

APA PsycArticles: Journal Article

The psychology of following: Conceptualizing and validating the Fundamental Follower Needs Inventory.

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Dominant/Authoritarian
Leader



Empowering
Leader



Transactional
Leader

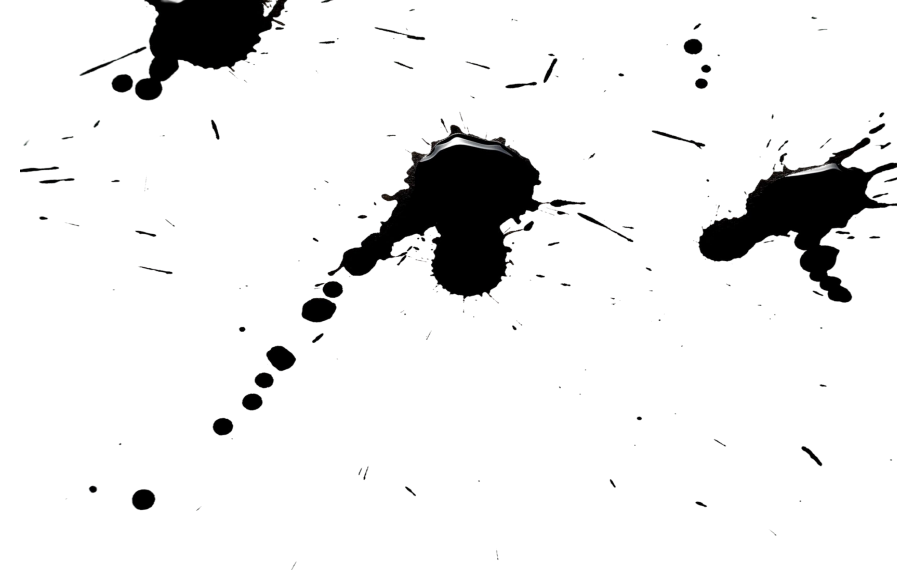


Transformational
Leader



Servant Leader





Just as people are internally diverse,
**effective leaders are not single, fixed
entities but flexible collections of
leadership capacities.**

Dominant/Authoritarian
Leader

Keep me safe
Threats, danger,
insecurity,
uncertainty


Protection

Need to belong
Foster
community,
safety,
atmosphere


Affiliation

Empowering
Leader

**Treat people
justly**
Conflict
management,
equality, morality


Fairness


Status

**Help me
succeed**
Elevate the
group, bask in
the glory of the
leader

Transactional
Leader

**Help me
understand**
Competence,
knowledge, skills


Expertise


Vision

**Show me where
to go**
Direction,
meaning,
purpose

Transformational
Leader

Servant Leader





RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY (RLT)

DO NOT focus on leadership as “what a single person” does, but

Focus on **patterns** of relationships and interactions.

Aligns with coaching that seeks to strengthen communication, mutual accountability, and **systemic relational quality**.



Available online at www.sciencedirect.com



The Leadership Quarterly 17 (2006) 654–676

The
Leadership
Quarterly

www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing

Mary Uhl-Bien *

Department of Management, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, NE, USA

Abstract

Relational leadership is a relatively new term in the leadership literature, and because of this, its meaning is open to interpretation. In the present article I describe two perspectives of relational leadership: an *entity* perspective that focuses on identifying attributes of individuals as they engage in interpersonal relationships, and a *relational* perspective that views leadership as a *process of social construction* through which certain understandings of leadership come about and are given privileged ontology. These approaches can be complementary, but their implications for study and practice are quite different. After reviewing leadership research relative to these two perspectives I offer Relational Leadership Theory (RLT) as an overarching framework for the study of leadership as a social influence process through which emergent coordination (e.g., evolving social order) and change (e.g., new approaches, values, attitudes, behaviors, ideologies) are constructed and produced. This framework addresses relationships both as an outcome of investigation (e.g., How are leadership relationships produced?) and a context for action (e.g., How do relational dynamics contribute to structuring?). RLT draws from both entity and relational ontologies and methodologies to more fully explore the relational dynamics of leadership and organizing.

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Keywords: Relational leadership; Entity perspectives; Relationality

EXERCISE 1: ME & MY TEAM ANALYSIS

Step 1 – The heart of the team

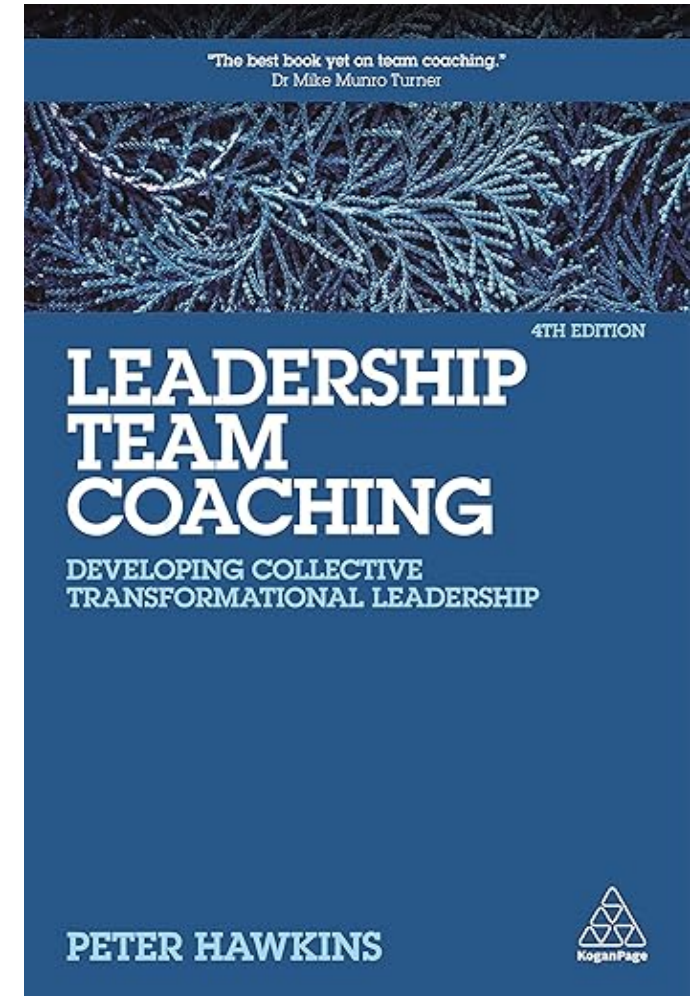
Step 2 – Your place in the team

Step 3 – Reflect about your place

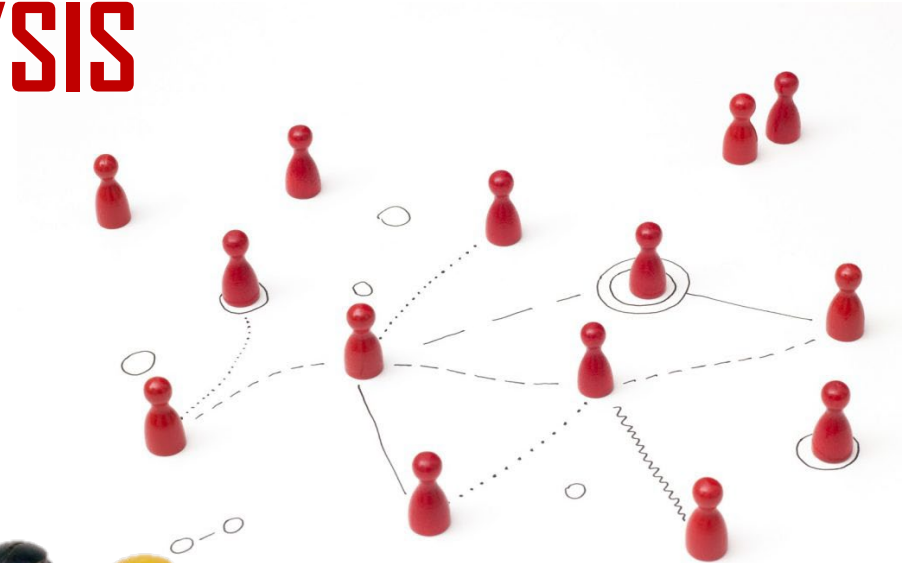
Step 4 – Moving to a different position

Step 5 – Reframe the team

Step 6 – If I were the team coach...



EXERCISE 1: ME & MY TEAM ANALYSIS



EXERCISE 1: ME & MY TEAM ANALYSIS

Step 1 – The heart of the team

Step 2 – Your place in the team

Step 3 – Reflect about your place

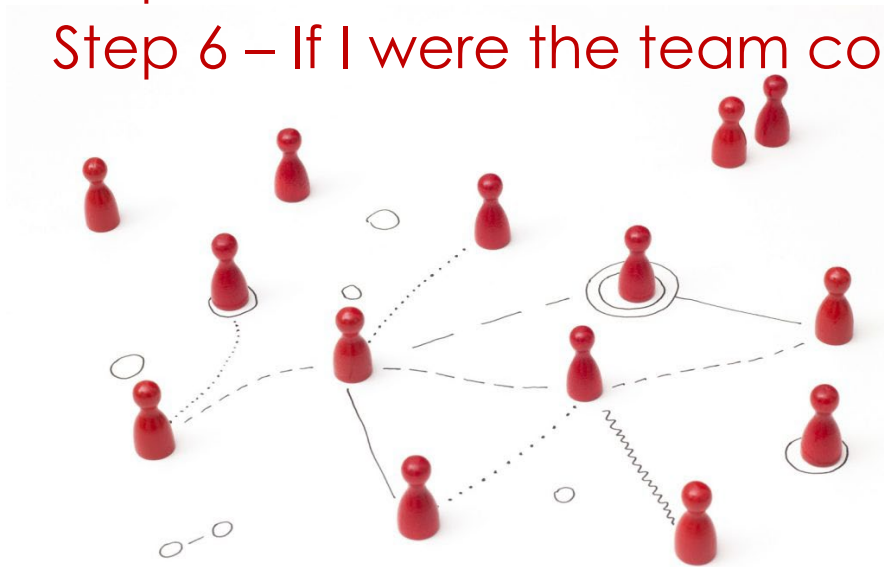
Step 4 – Moving to a different position

Step 5 – Reframe the team

Step 6 – If I were the team coach...

Choose objects, symbols, pictures, graphics ... that symbolize “**what is at the core of your team**”

Place these in the centre of the set-up



EXERCISE 1: ME & MY TEAM ANALYSIS

Step 1 – The heart of the team

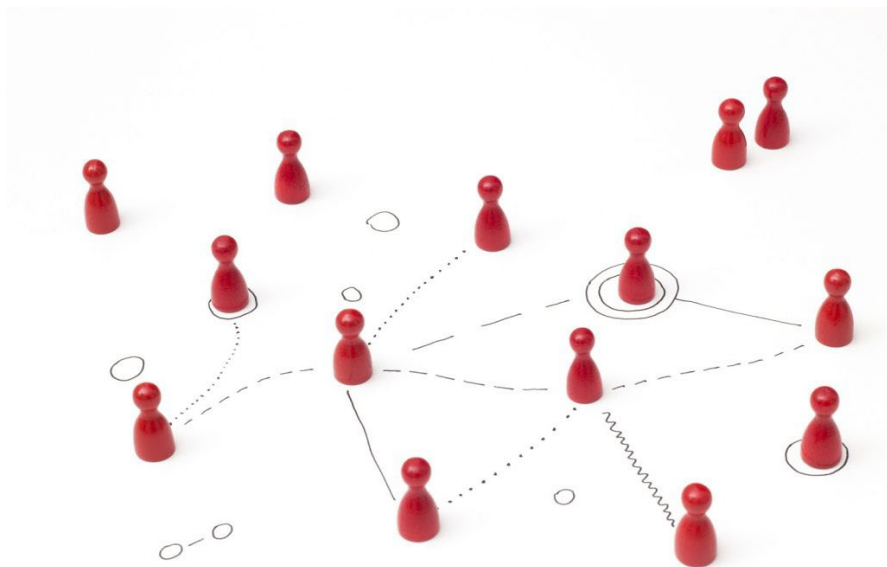
Step 2 – Your place in the team

Step 3 – Reflect about your place

Step 4 – Moving to a different position

Step 5 – Reframe the team

Step 6 – If I were the team coach...



- Now set out the team: use an object/puppet for each team member
- Locate yourself
- Where are you?
- Who are those close to you and who are those distant from you?



EXERCISE 1: ME & MY TEAM ANALYSIS

Step 1 – The heart of the team

Step 2 – Your place in the team

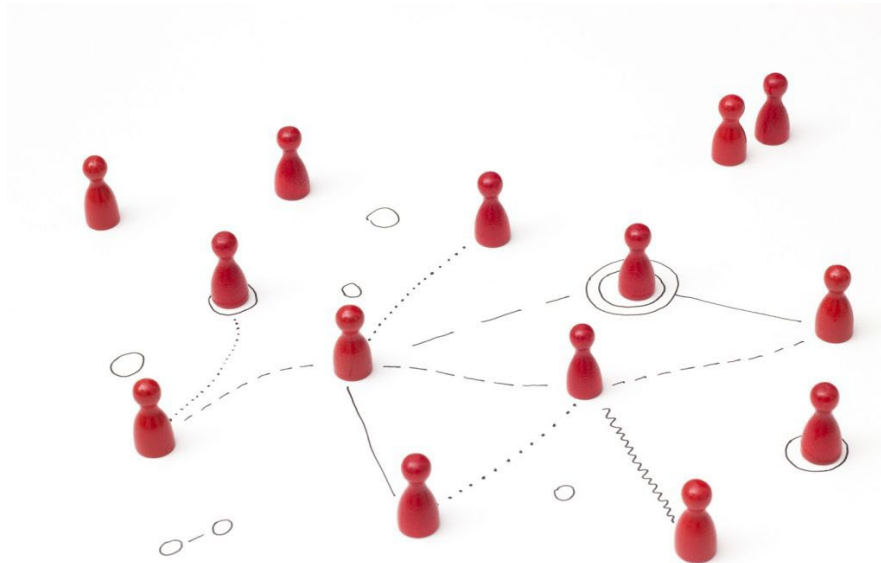
Step 3 – Reflect about your place

Step 4 – Moving to a different position

Step 5 – Reframe the team

Step 6 – If I were the team coach...

- Make statements that start with: “In this position of the team I...”
- I think...
- I feel ...
- I observe ...
- I look at...
- I ignore...
- I cannot...
- And so on



EXERCISE 1: ME & MY TEAM ANALYSIS

Step 1 – The heart of the team

Step 2 – Your place in the team

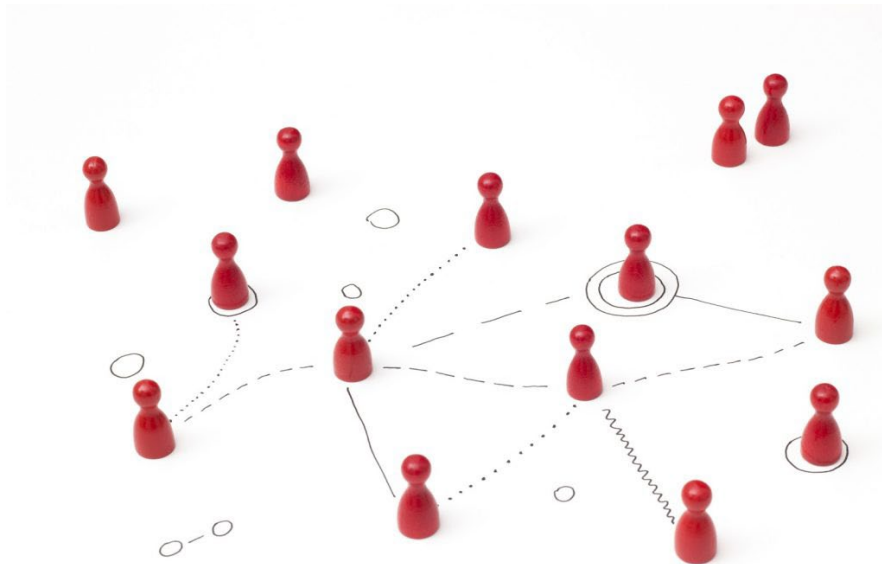
Step 3 – Reflect about your place

Step 4 – Moving to a different position

Step 5 – Reframe the team

Step 6 – If I were the team coach...

- Would you like to move to a different position? Where? Why?
- How would this shift feel?
- What is needed to realize this shift?
- What is different at the different position? Reflect again.



EXERCISE 1: ME & MY TEAM ANALYSIS

Step 1 – The heart of the team

Step 2 – Your place in the team

Step 3 – Reflect about your place

Step 4 – Moving to a different position

Step 5 – Reframe the team

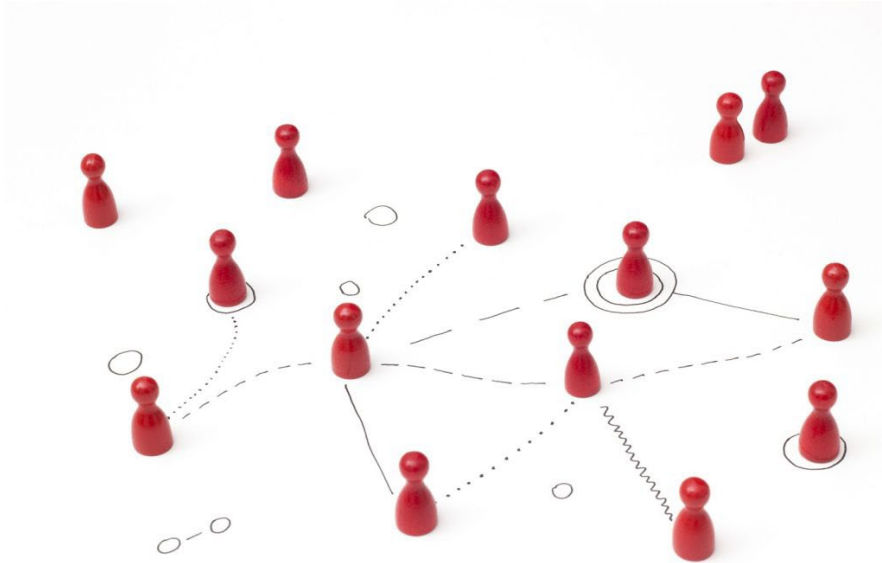
Step 6 – If I were the team coach...

If your team would be a family, what sort of family would it be? Who would take which position? What about you?

If your team were a TV-show/series/movie: which would it be? Why?

If your team was a bunch of animals, what sort of bunch would it be? And who is which animal? Why? What about you?

Be creative, think wild, out of the box...



EXERCISE 1: ME & MY TEAM ANALYSIS

Step 1 – The heart of the team

Step 2 – Your place in the team

Step 3 – Reflect about your place

Step 4 – Moving to a different position

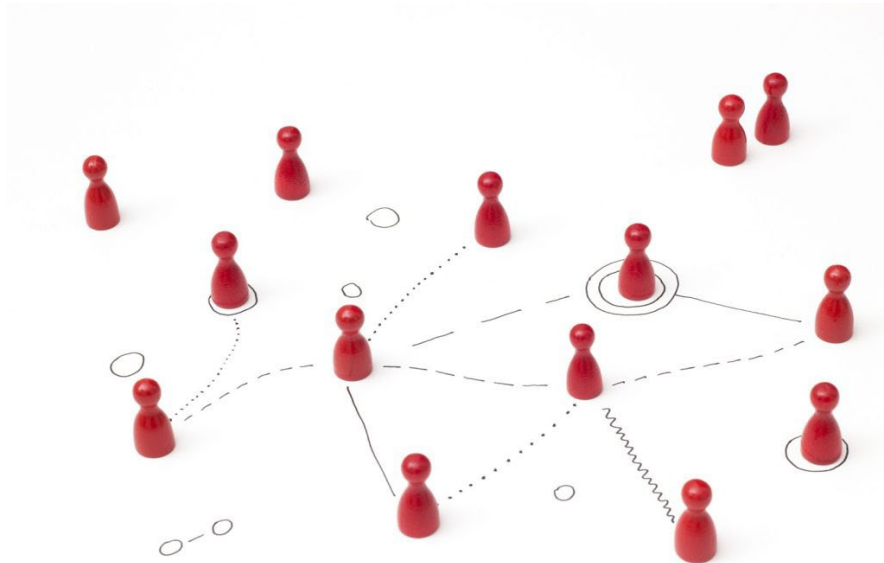
Step 5 – Reframe the team

Step 6 – If I were the team coach...

Now look back at the constellation you made.

Look at it from different perspectives, from close by and further away.

If YOU were the coach of this team, what would be your approach? And why?





EXERCISE 2: DIVING DEEP – DO YOUR (COMPANY'S) GOALS ALIGN WITH WHO YOU ARE?

Why This Exercise? To lead AND to follow with purpose—we must understand the goals we pursue and whether these goals truly align with our skills, beliefs, identity, and deeper mission. Leadership AND follower-behaviour begins with self-awareness.

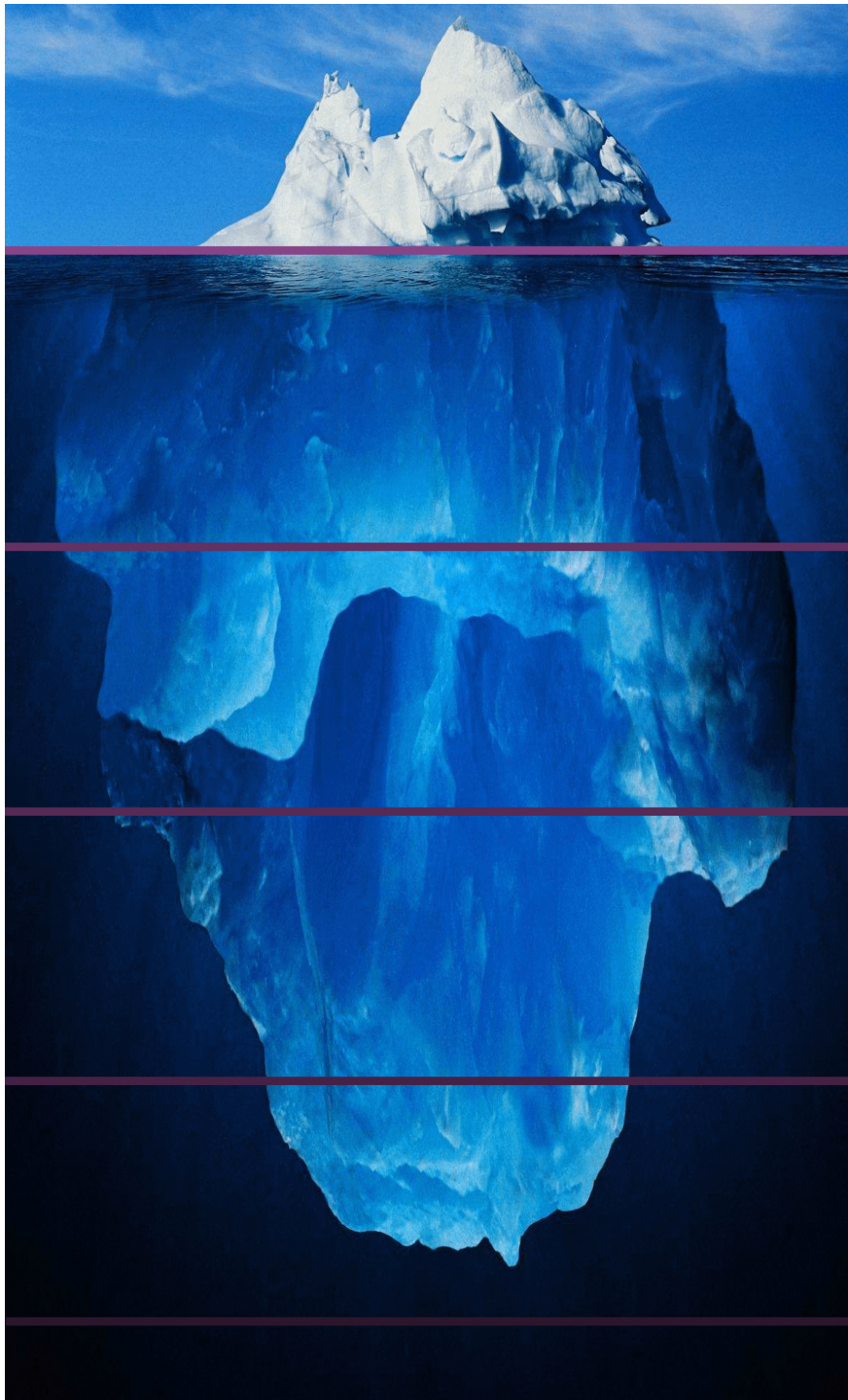
Instructions (4 Steps)

Step 1: Clarify the Goals (Above the Surface)

Step 2: Dive Below the Surface – The Underwater Iceberg Layers

Step 3: Context and Leadership

Step 4: Reflecting on the Bigger Picture



GOAL **COMPANY GOALS**

BEHAVIOUR

in CONTEXT/ENVIRONMENT

SKILLS

BELIEFS

&

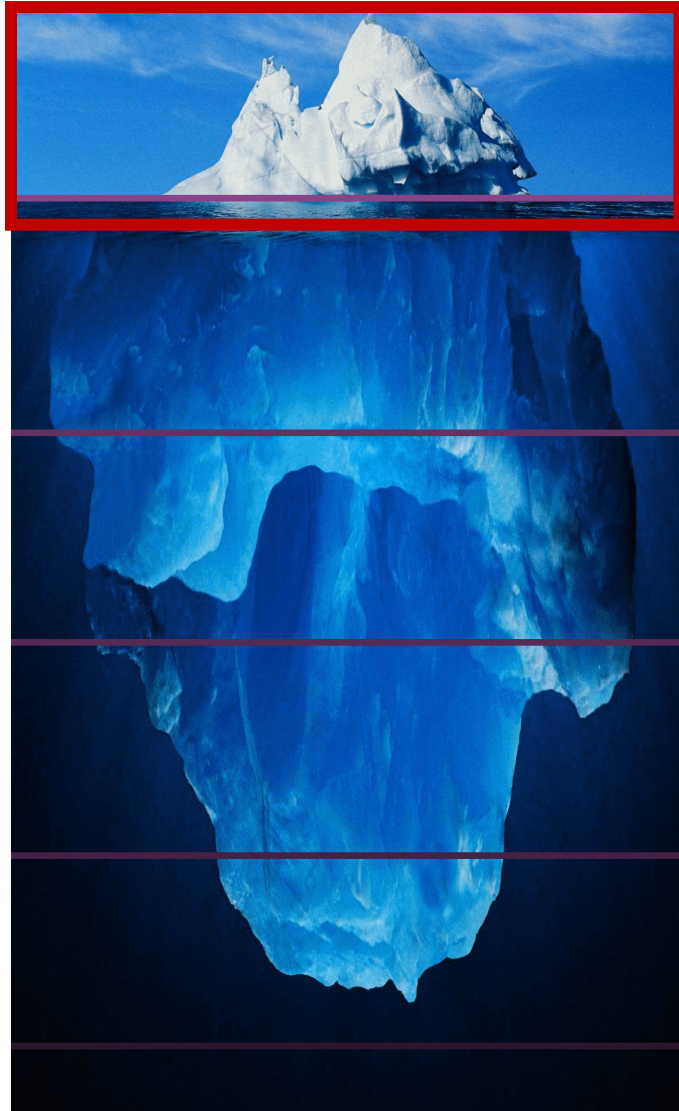
VALUES

IDENTITY

MISSION

WHY

EXERCISE 2: DIVING DEEP – DO YOUR (COMPANY'S) GOALS ALIGN WITH WHO YOU ARE?



GOAL COMPANY GOALS

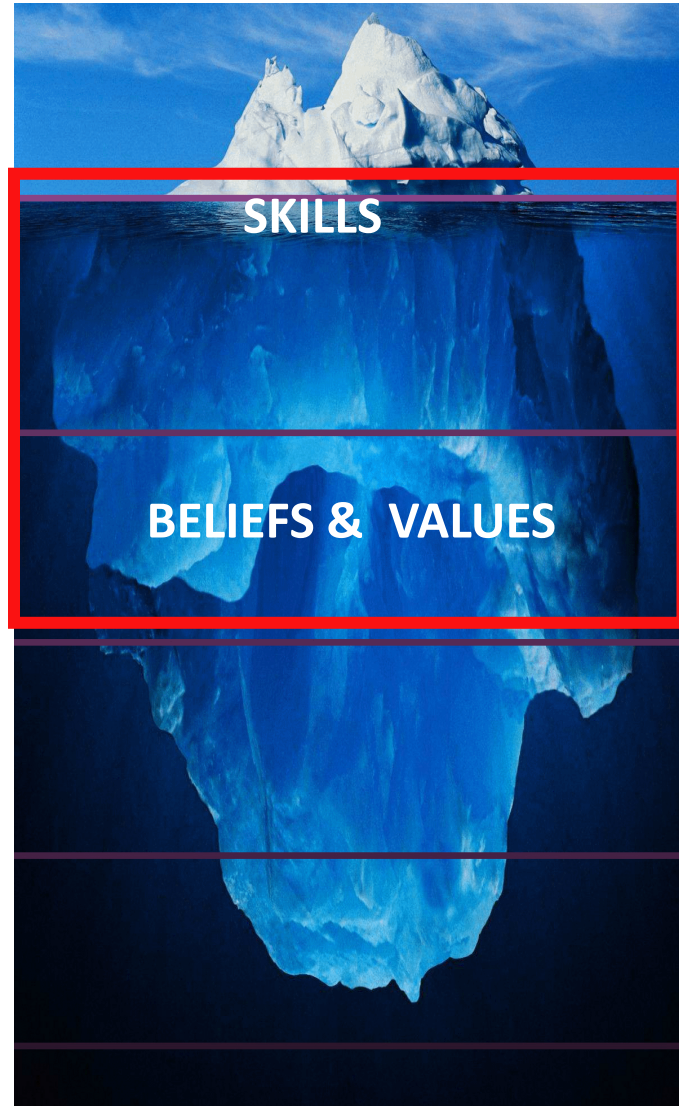
Step 1: Clarify the Goals (Above the Surface)

“What are we aiming for?”

Company Goals: What are the official, stated goals of your company or team? (e.g., growth, innovation, customer satisfaction, efficiency...)

Your Personal Goals: In this context, what are **your own professional goals**? (e.g., learning a skill, contributing to change, better balance, promotion,...)

EXERCISE 2: DIVING DEEP – DO YOUR (COMPANY'S) GOALS ALIGN WITH WHO YOU ARE?



Step 2: Dive Below the Surface – The Underwater Iceberg Layers

“Do my goals fit with who I am?”

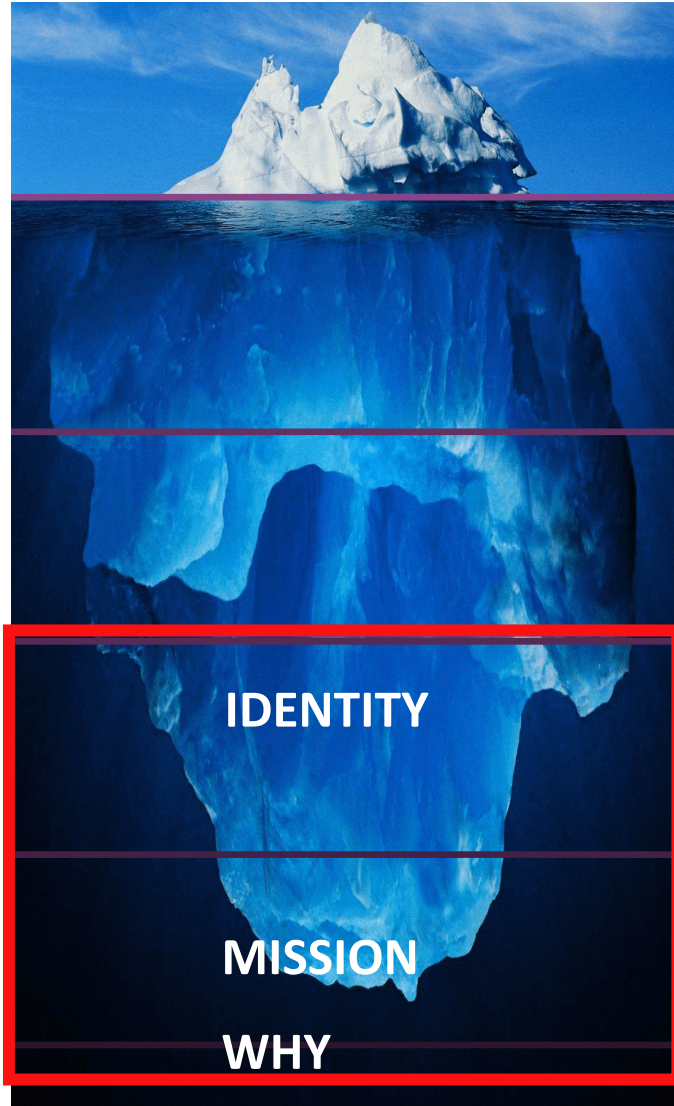
At the Waterline: **SKILLS**

- What skills are needed to reach these goals?
- Do you have them already? Which are visible, and which are unnoticed or underused?
- Which skills would you love to develop further?

Just Below the Surface: **BELIEFS & VALUES**

- What do you believe in strongly?
- What values are non-negotiable for you?
- Do your current goals honor or contradict these values?

EXERCISE 2: DIVING DEEP – DO YOUR (COMPANY'S) GOALS ALIGN WITH WHO YOU ARE?



Step 2: Dive Below the Surface – The Underwater Iceberg Layers

“Do my goals fit with who I am?”

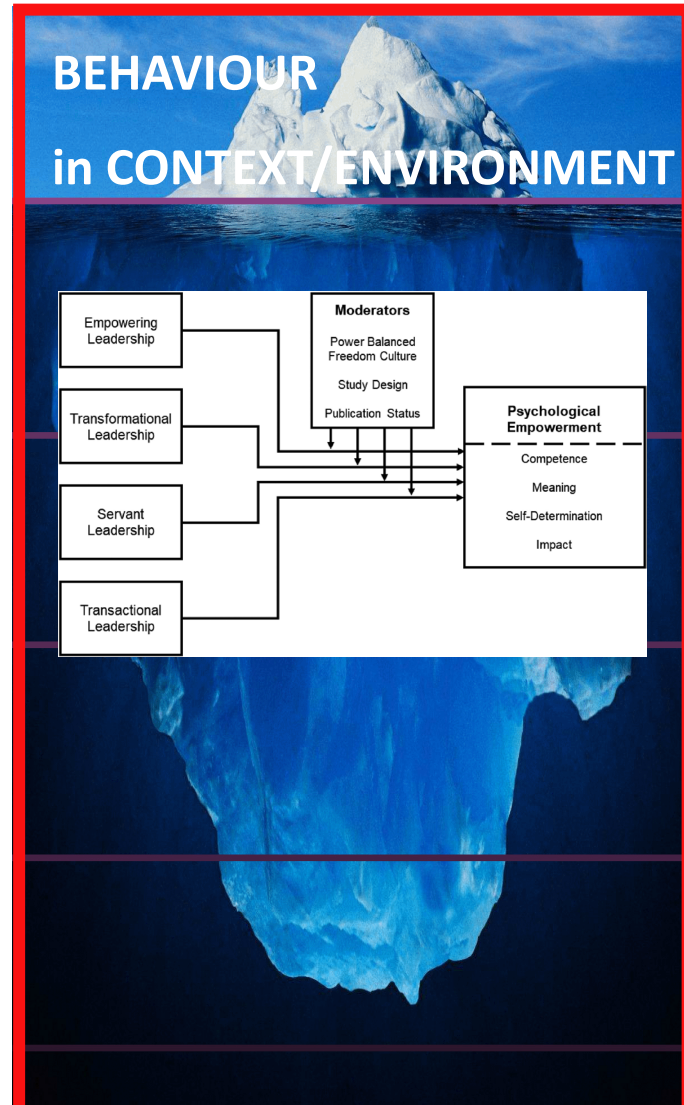
Deeper: IDENTITY

- Who are you (professionally/personally)?
- What roles matter to you (e.g., coach, learner, creative, team player...)?
- Are your goals aligned with your sense of self?
- Or do they feel externally imposed?

At the Deepest Level: MISSION

- Why do you do what you do? What gives your work meaning?
- Can you trace a line from your current goals to your deeper mission?
- If not, where is the disconnect?

EXERCISE 2: DIVING DEEP – DO YOUR (COMPANY'S) GOALS ALIGN WITH WHO YOU ARE?



Step 3: Context and Leadership

"What kind of leadership environment am I in—and what do I need to thrive?"

1. Current Leadership Style:

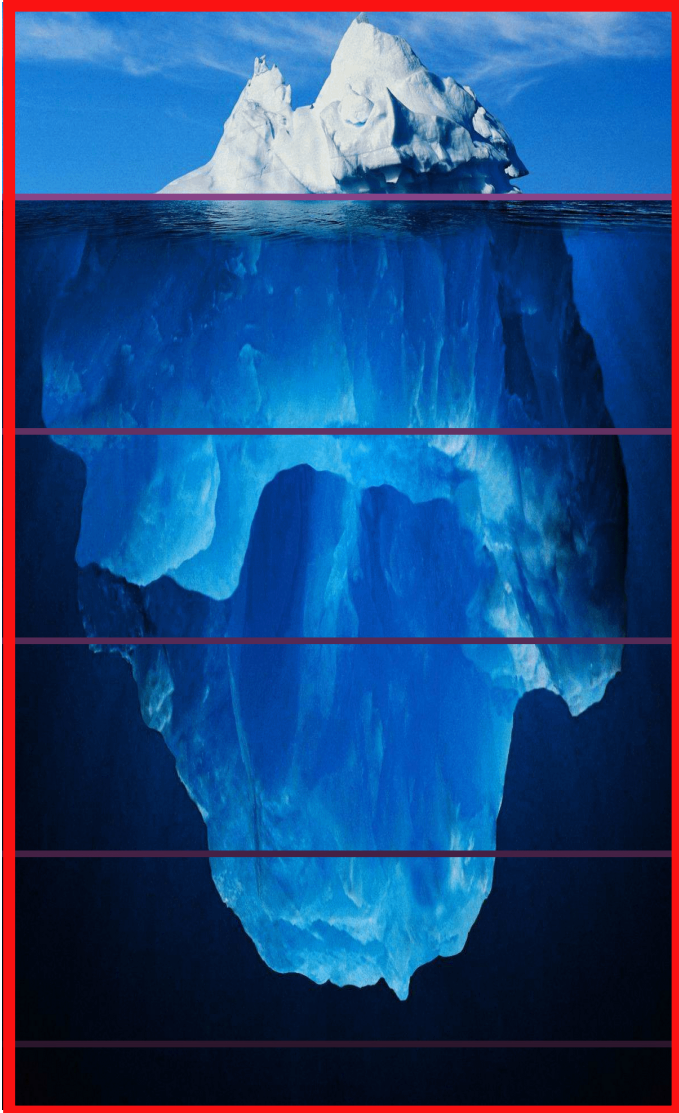
- How would you describe the dominant leadership style in your workplace?
 - Autocratic, transactional, transformational, empowering, servant
- How does this style affect your motivation and ability to reach your goals?

2. Needed Leadership Style:

- What kind of leadership would help your skills grow and flourish?
- What style would best align with your deeper values, identity, and mission?

3. **Reflect on the fit** (or mismatch) between the leadership you experience and the support you need.

EXERCISE 2: DIVING DEEP – DO YOUR (COMPANY'S) GOALS ALIGN WITH WHO YOU ARE?



Step 4: Reflecting on the Bigger Picture

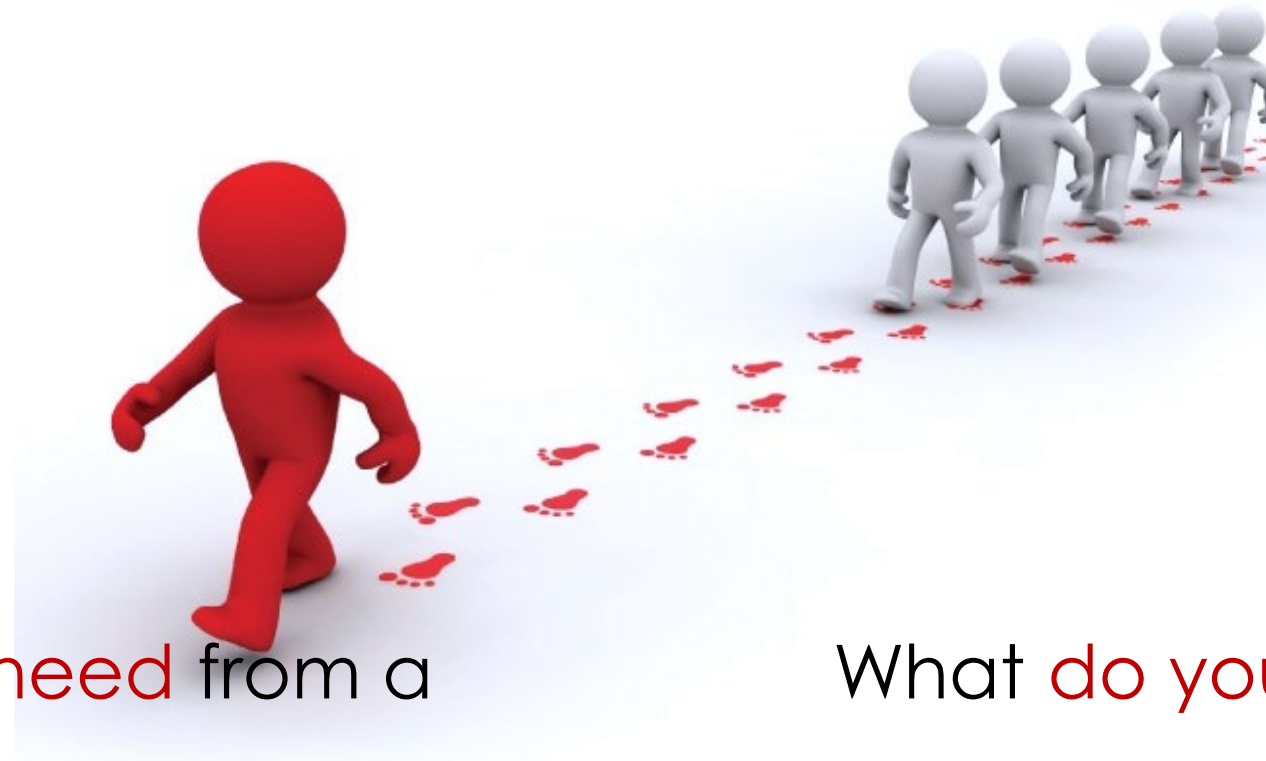
"What can I take from this?"

- What have you learned about your **own alignment (or misalignment)** between goals and who you are?
- What would need to change in your context—or in your approach—to improve that alignment?
- What kind of leadership do you want/need (to offer) based on this insight?
- How can this reflection make you better communicate what you need?

THUS: KNOW YOURSELF & OTHERS around you

What **can you offer** as a **leader?**

What **do you need** as a **follower?**



What **do you need** from a **leader?**

What **do your followers** **need?**



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