

Leadership: The Art of Moving Forward

Clarity, Consequence, and the Disappearance of Direction in Contemporary Leadership

By [Federico Malatesta](https://federicomalatesta.com)

Jun 24, 2025



1. The “How” That Swallowed the “What”.

Something subtle - but consequential - has happened to the word leadership. Once associated with decisions, direction, and the burden of responsibility, it has increasingly shifted toward a focus on emotional tone and interpersonal affect. Browse any number of corporate mission statements, HR brochures, leadership development programs and social media posts, and you’re likely to find variations of the same refrain:

“Leadership is about creating an environment where people feel recognized, respected, and meaningfully included.”

This is not wrong. But it is incomplete. And worse, **it is incomplete in a way that conceals the essential point.**

It's not hard to see where this turn came from. After years of flattened hierarchies, institutional mistrust, and burnout, many organizations have rightly looked inward at their relational culture. Empathy, inclusivity, and psychological safety have taken center stage as correctives to more authoritarian models of leadership.

The problem is not that these humanizing elements exist. The problem is that they've begun to substitute for the central task of leadership itself.

You can make everyone feel heard and still be leading nowhere. You can build belonging and still avoid making a single meaningful decision. You can foster emotional fluency and remain entirely agnostic about where your team is headed. **Emotional sensitivity, in other words, is a fine method but it is not the function of leadership.** The latter has a far more elemental requirement: **to lead is to move.** It is to choose a direction and take others with you.

It is worth remembering the etymology of “to lead”, derived from the Old English *lædan*, (to guide, to carry along a way or path), which is in turn related to the Proto-Germanic *laidijaną*, which also meant “to cause to go”, and which ultimately stems from the Proto-Indo-European root **leith-* meaning “to go”, “to travel”, and, as importantly, “to cross a threshold”. So, at its core, **to lead means to walk ahead, to show the way**, to carry forward, with the implicit understanding that others choose to follow.

In summary, there is no leadership without moving forward.

If the confusion around leadership today can be traced to a single conceptual slip, it is this: the failure to distinguish the “*how*” of leadership from the “*what*”. The *how* refers to tone, delivery, interpersonal intelligence, relational fluency. The *what* refers to the essential task of leadership: to choose a direction under conditions of uncertainty and take responsibility for the outcome.

This is not a nostalgic call for command-and-control models. But it is a reminder that **leadership exists only in relation to motion.** A leader's job is not to reflect the group indefinitely. It is to act. To consult, yes. To consider deeply, absolutely. But ultimately, to decide. To conflate these is to mistake interpersonal decency for strategic clarity. It reflects a wider cultural tendency to treat discomfort as failure, and candor as threat. But leadership, almost by definition, requires the **discomfort of choice.** And choice, in any serious environment, entails **consequence.**

To lead is not merely to hold space for others. It is to define the space in which movement will occur and to take responsibility for the path that follows.

The current vogue for emotionally intelligent leadership - summarized in lines like *“people don’t quit jobs, they quit managers”* - has merit. An emotionally attuned leader is certainly more effective than a blunter counterpart. But in many organizations, this has become the entire definition of leadership. When emotional atmosphere becomes the measure, leadership devolves into consensus choreography. It becomes reactive, therapeutic, polite. This drift is mirrored in the coaching field itself. Leaders today are encouraged to build safety, regulate emotion, and attend to energy. But often without corresponding emphasis on vision, strategy, or decision-making. In many organizations, inclusion is emphasized so strongly that initiative becomes subordinate to harmony, leaders are encouraged to center the group’s comfort rather than direct its future.

The modern reframe of leadership as belonging + empathy + inclusion flattens this distinction. It treats friction as failure, direction as imposition, and decision as threat. That this framework thrives in large corporate HR environments is not incidental. It aligns perfectly with institutional brand-safety logic. It allows leaders to be “relational” without ever becoming decisive. It replaces risk with tone.

But leadership that shapes reality - real leadership - introduces risk. It says: *“We are going this way. And I will own what happens next”*. **Anything less is facilitation.** It is worth underlining how there are many leaders who prefer a framework which is more like *“We are going this way. And I will own what happens next only if it goes well, otherwise it’s your fault.”* Obviously, this is a degenerative leadership model and it’s definitely not what we advocating here.

2. Choosing in the Dark

To lead is not to manage. It is not to facilitate, moderate, nurture, coach, mentor or protect consensus. Those may be elements of leadership, but they are not its core. At its heart, leadership means **making a directional choice in conditions of uncertainty and owning what comes next.** It means moving before the path is fully lit, before consensus is sealed, before outcomes are guaranteed. And it means asking others to follow you, not because they’re certain, but because you are willing to be.

This is not recklessness. Many of the best leaders proceed carefully, skeptically, fully aware of what's at stake. But they proceed. The act of decision is what separates leadership from commentary, culture work, or process stewardship. There is nothing glamorous about it. In fact, most real leadership moments arrive with a particular kind of solitude. To decide is to collapse ambiguity. To move in one direction is to close off others. And that narrowing carries risk.

Leadership, then, is not defined by personality or tone, but by this simple, repeatable act: **choosing a path and accepting what follows**. You can be introverted or bold, quiet or expansive. You can lead through questioning or assertion. But if you are not moving things forward - deciding and absorbing - you are not leading. You may be supporting. You may be coordinating. But you are not leading. This is not a semantic distinction. It's operational. And it matters because the modern leadership discourse has become so saturated with affective language that people now enter roles of influence with no expectation of making hard calls. Presence is mistaken for pressure-bearing. Visibility is mistaken for accountability. And the costs are not abstract.

In business, this looks like over-dependence on “alignment” rituals, where consensus becomes a surrogate for clarity. In government, it can mean paralysis in the face of unpopular but necessary decisions. In the startup world, it shows up as perpetual iteration without directional commitment, with teams rowing hard in multiple directions under the illusion of agility.

There is a difference between uncertainty and indecision. The former is a condition. The latter is a choice. And leadership is where that line is drawn.



3. Leadership in Practice: Case Examples.

It's one thing to say leadership is about direction and responsibility. It's another to see how that actually unfolds in environments with constraints, pressure, and consequences.

Here are three brief case examples that show the difference between leadership and the performance of leadership. Between those who choose and those who stall. Between the ones who move and those who manage motion.

A. Satya Nadella at Microsoft: Vision with Accountability.

When Satya Nadella took over Microsoft in 2014, the company had lost both cultural credibility and strategic coherence. Under his predecessor, Steve Ballmer, Microsoft had become bureaucratic and internally competitive. Its growth was sluggish. Its influence was waning.

Nadella's now-famous Hit Refresh memo wasn't a morale boost. It was a redirection. He reoriented the company around cloud services, embraced open-source systems, and transformed Microsoft's posture toward competitors. It was a strategic pivot wrapped in relational intelligence, not the other way around.

He didn't just make employees feel heard. He made a bet, defined a path, and took responsibility for the results.

B. Angela Merkel during the Refugee Crisis: Decisiveness Under Pressure.

In 2015, Angela Merkel made the decision to admit over one million Syrian refugees into Germany. It was not the safe or popular move. It generated backlash within her own coalition and strained the European consensus. Irrespective of any personal or political evaluation of this policy, it's undeniable that it was a high-risk decision, rather than a performative gesture. It would shape her legacy, cost her political capital, and destabilize her majority. But she did it anyway. Because someone had to decide. And she chose responsibility over optics.

Leadership is not about always being right. It's about being the one who owns the weight of a hard call when the room is silent.

C. Adam Neumann and WeWork: Vision Untethered from Governance.

Adam Neumann was charismatic, boundaryless, and idealistic. He promised to reshape work culture. He talked about "elevating consciousness" and "building a new global community." Investors fell in line. Employees bought in.

But there was nothing behind the pitch. No operating model. No fiscal constraint. No strategic grounding. WeWork became a monument to unaccountable vision, a company led by performance rather than discipline.

This wasn't a failure of dreaming big. It was a failure of choosing what mattered and sustaining it. What distinguishes real leaders in these examples? Not correctness. Not certainty. But a consistent thread: the willingness to choose a path and own the outcome, even when it costs them.

4: A Leadership Culture Afraid of Its Own Shadow.

To understand how we arrived at today's emotionally saturated view of leadership, we need to trace how leadership theory has evolved, from directive authority to relational presence.

In the early 20th century, leadership was often defined through trait theory, the **"Great Man"** model, rooted in the assumption that leadership was innate, decisive, and hierarchical. Thinkers like Thomas Carlyle and Francis Galton helped popularize the idea that leaders were born, not made, and that they succeeded through courage, vision, and force of character. This view dominated both business and military literature for decades. Unfortunately, it still lingers today.

Later, the sociologist **Max Weber** reframed leadership through the lens of authority. He defined three legitimate forms: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. Crucially, all three were grounded in a central act: the exercise of direction and legitimacy, the power to decide. Leadership meant action, not posture. It meant standing in a space of responsibility and shaping a collective path forward.

By the 1970s and '80s, **Transformational Leadership theory** began to emerge, particularly through the work of James MacGregor Burns and Bernard Bass. They introduced a model in which leaders were expected to inspire, align around values, and raise performance by connecting people to shared meaning. In the last few decades, this leadership framework has been the default for most large organizations. The focus shifted, but there was no doubt that the leader led.

The next shift came in the 1990s. This was the turn to **emotional attunement**. Popularized by Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* and Robert Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership*, the leader became an empath, a listener, a mirror. These models brought welcome correctives to older top-down styles, but they also subtly displaced the core function of leadership. Involuntary or not, the *how* increasingly started to overshadow the *what*. Then came the coaching industry. The startup boom. The rise of flat hierarchies and "distributed authority." Leadership was no longer about making decisions; it was about holding space. By the 2010s, as these models

filtered into HR policy and corporate learning programs, the language of emotional attunement became codified, not as a supplement to leadership, but as its substitute. **The result was predictable: tone replaced trajectory.** The ideal leader was not a decider, but a container: present, attuned, emotionally fluent, non-invasive.

Today's models borrow heavily from organizational psychology (particularly Amy Edmondson's work on psychological safety), attachment theory, and trauma-informed practices. **These frameworks are not invalid and this shift didn't emerge from nowhere.** Traditional leadership models often left little room for emotional nuance, and the psychological toll - especially on those historically excluded from power - was real. The rise of emotionally intelligent leadership was an important and often necessary corrective. **The psychological dimensions of leadership - empathy, inclusion, attunement - are very important.** A leader that operates within these models is certainly more effective. Edmondson's own research showed that the highest-performing teams combine trust and candor. She never claimed that psychological safety should override accountability, but rather that it is the condition that allows risk and challenge to coexist with respect. Going back to the etymology of the word, "to lead" is a relational and participatory verb, not a hierarchical one. In that sense, it does not align with legacy command-and-control frames, which derive from the Latin *imperare* (to command) or *ducere* (to pull or draw), both of which have more directional or force-based implications.

Predictably, however, the followers ended up much more dogmatic than the original thinkers, gradually **hardening the theory, stripping it of nuance, and pushing it toward orthodoxy.** As a result, in many environments, the affective style of leadership started to replace the act itself. And here lies the distortion. In correcting the method, these frameworks became the defining narrative rather than the supporting layer. **Leaders started to be selected for warmth rather than clarity.** They are now praised for tone instead of motion and evaluated by how "safe" others feel, not whether the team is moving anywhere at all. This is not an intellectual accident. It's a cultural choice. One that avoids risk, suppresses conflict, and disguises inertia as emotional intelligence. But **the function of leadership is not to reduce all discomfort.** It is to carry the weight of decisions and to clarify what is at stake when movement matters most.



5: Why Leadership Must Hurt.

If leadership has lost meaning in contemporary discourse, it's because too many of its rituals now unfold without consequence. In environments where decisions are reversible, where outcomes can be endlessly reframed, and where accountability is diffuse, the term leadership becomes little more than decor. It signals presence rather than action. But the truth is simple: **leadership only matters when the cost of being wrong is real.**

This isn't a celebration of recklessness. It is an acknowledgment that what distinguishes leadership from coordination is exposure. **The leader chooses a path when no perfect option exists.** They make the call, not because they're infallible, but because they're the one willing to hold the result. Contrary to popular opinion, stakes are not a flaw in leadership, they are its definition. The moment you declare a direction, you close off others. The moment you assign responsibility, you redistribute pressure. The moment you choose in real time (with incomplete data, conflicting feedback, and limited control) you step into a high-friction, high-accountability space that others often prefer to avoid.

Consensus may be desirable. Collaboration may be strategic. But neither can substitute for the moment when someone must decide, and others must live with it. This asymmetry is not authoritarian, it is the condition of responsibility.

Most serious leaders don't relish this role. Many are reluctant. But they accept it because the alternative - drift, delay, managed neutrality, losing ground to competitors - is worse. They understand that clarity is not free. It costs attention, it costs authority and it invites critique. But it also makes movement possible. Without risk, there is no test. Without a test, there is no clarity. Without clarity, there is no leadership. And that is what distinguishes leadership from every other role in an organization. Not its language. Not its warmth. But the fact that at the end of the road, the decision is theirs and the consequences are real.

6. Conclusion

To lead is not to hold hands. It is to go first. To step into ambiguity when others hesitate. To collapse uncertainty into action. To name what matters when clarity is incomplete. And to carry the weight of that choice, publicly, visibly, and without guarantee.

Empathy matters. Psychological nuance matters. Inclusion matters. But these are not the definition of leadership. They are the conditions under which leadership can flourish. They are how we lead, not why we lead, or what leadership ultimately demands.

The purpose of leadership is not affirmation. It is movement, direction.

Leadership is not a social style. It is not a cultural mood. It is the ability - and the burden - of making something real when it is still uncertain, and being responsible for what happens as a result. In this age of consensus seeking and emotional diplomacy, leadership will increasingly require what culture avoids: clarity with consequence. Because at the end of every strategy deck, facilitation session, or stakeholder alignment meeting, someone still has to say:

"This is where we're going. And I will own what comes next."

Curated bibliography (in alphabetical order)

- Bass, Bernard M., *“Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations”*, (Free Press, 1985) and *“The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications”*, (Simon & Schuster, 2009).
- Burns, James MacGregor, *“Leadership”*, (Harper & Row, 1978).
- Carreyrou, John, *“Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup”*, (Knopf, 2018).
- Charan, Ram, Stephen Drotter, and James Noel, *“The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership-Powered Company”* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), and the updated version *“The Leadership Pipeline: Developing Leaders in the Digital Age”*, (Wiley, 2024).
- Edmondson, Amy C. *“Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams,”* Administrative Science Quarterly 44, no. 2 (1999): 350–383; The Fearless Organization (Harvard Business School, 2018).
- Farrell, Maureen, and Eliot Brown, *“The Cult of We: WeWork, Adam Neumann, and the Great Startup Delusion”*, (Crown Publishing, 2021).
- Goleman, Daniel, *“Emotional Intelligence”*, (Bantam Books, 1995).
- Greenleaf, Robert K., *“The Servant as Leader”*, revised (The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2012).
- Heifetz, Ronald, and Marty Linsky, *“Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading”*, (Harvard Business Review Press, 2002).
- Nadella, Satya, *“Hit Refresh: The Quest to Rediscover Microsoft’s Soul and Imagine a Better Future for Everyone”*, (Harper Business, 2017).
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey, and Sutton, R.I. *“The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action”*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).
- Weber, Max, *“Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology”*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (University of California Press, 1978).
- Weick, Karl E., *“Sensemaking in Organizations”*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995).