

LEADERSHIP UNMASKED: NAVIGATING THE GAP BETWEEN EXPECTATION AND EXPERIENCE

by Glenn Williams



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We have a problem!

We're losing top leadership talent at an alarming rate. Gifted individuals are throwing in the towel and walking away. This global phenomenon is robbing organizations of visionaries and solution architects.

But what is driving the exodus? Why are those with a calling to leadership choosing to give it away? As we'll see, the reasons are multi-layered, nuanced, and often culturally influenced. However, the stories are similar across industries and regardless of nationality.

There is a gap, a disconnect, and at times, a yawning chasm between what we believe leadership is, what we're told it is, and the lived experiences of leaders.

Leaders are walking away, disillusioned by failure, disappointment, and hurt. The result is that massive latent leadership talent goes unleveraged, and we are all the poorer.

I believe we are reaching a threshold moment. We need to face the issues head-on to avoid a leadership vacuum. Yet, there is hope; there are answers and solutions if we can learn from the past and give leaders the tools to help them lead themselves and others well.

This article will consider some significant factors identified by LCP Global and others on the issue, drawing on data and feedback from more than 3,000 clients. For the sake of brevity, we don't have time to explore all aspects in detail.

Leaders are human

Yes, leaders have the privilege and responsibility to lead others forward, but what happens internally remains unseen for most. Leaders experience stress, anxiety, fear, and hurt. They live with insecurities lying just below the surface and battle the self-accusatory barbs that can betray a strong public persona.

General Stanley McChrystal, four-star general of the US Army (retired) after 34 years of service states,

"I found that leaders who exhibited all the right traits often fell short, while others who possessed none of the characteristics of traditional leadership succeeded...a significant gap between how we speak of it and how it is experienced".¹

Those in leadership know firsthand that what others see can differ vastly from what resides in their

minds. Success is usually at the forefront of a leader's efforts and a significant driver in nearly everything they do. As leaders, we relish the pressure, the challenges, the sense of achievement, and the accolades. But we also know that not everything goes according to plan. While some can adapt quickly, others struggle to adjust to new realities while persevering toward the goal.

THE PROBLEM

If we're going to be part of the solution, we need to start by asking some hard questions.

Do we sufficiently prepare people for the reality of leadership in a global context, considering the multitude of variables, including stark cultural differences in the understanding of leadership and the expectations placed on those who lead?

Why can some leaders pick themselves up, dust themselves off after a setback and continue to chase their goals, while others can't? This may be particularly true for leaders asked to leave a business unexpectedly, forced to reimagine and rebuild lives and careers.

Why do some move on with seeming ease, while for others, it becomes a burden that never lifts? As a leader responsible for significant outcomes, how do you prepare yourself to experience setbacks?

A leader's identity and sense of value often hang tenuously by the thread of success or failure. How can we mitigate the emotional and physical toll and ensure our visceral reactions to events don't set us back further? How do we make these setbacks and our responses a detour, not a hard stop?

These questions are vitally important when considering how our working life and goals are linked to how we and others value us.

THE SOLUTION

The keys to healthy longevity in leadership revolve around building resilience and capacity. But they can only be achieved in the context of identity and relational integrity.

From our work with leaders around the world, we have identified five leadership anchors that, when aligned, will help leaders navigate times of great challenge while continuing to lead themselves and others well. On the surface, they may appear simple enough, but if that were true, there wouldn't be the need to keep reinforcing them.

1. The quality of your relationships
2. A clear definition of success and an understanding of your motivational drivers
3. Commitment to character development that builds confidence and resilience

4. Transforming your personal script so you can make better decisions
5. Creating a new success trajectory personally, professionally, and corporately

This article will address the ways in which we can help leaders, current and future, stay faithful to their calling, rise above the cut and thrust, and bring out the best in those they lead.



1. THE QUALITY OF YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

When Leaders Are Lost

Leadership always occurs in the context of relationships. The key relationships in a leader's world contextualize their identity, behavior, and performance. Relationships are the key to their success and fulfillment. Equally, they enable us to weather life's storms, providing safe harbours to heal, learn, and grow.

Many variables influence a leader's life and resilience. I went from one success to another, from one

leadership position to the next, with bigger goals, challenges, larger budgets, more direct reports, more travel, and greater responsibility.

Each new role required a bit more of me. And truthfully, I loved it! But, at the same time, I was torn between seeking success as a leader and wanting to be a good husband and father while feeling I was constantly falling short.

The pressure is often amplified if you work in the not-for-profit sector or ministry, where you expect to give more of yourself for a worthy cause. In my case, a lack of awareness, combined with a lack of healthy boundaries, led to a significant decline in my energy levels and focus.

My emotional and intellectual bandwidth waned, leaving little to invest in my closest relationships and friendships. My busyness blinded me to the signs that my capacity was finite and fragile. If I had been honest with myself then, I might have acknowledged that being busy validated my significance, reinforcing that my identity as a leader was a driving force in my life and that success was important to me.

Contributing to my 'lostness' was that I didn't realize I was lost, and when I did, I pushed it away, not wanting to confront the implications. I didn't want to stop seeing myself as a successful leader. More than that, I didn't want others to stop seeing me as successful. Not only would it be disheartening, but I genuinely believed it would affect my career and limit any future opportunities.

It turns out I'm not alone. Let me introduce you to Andrew and John. Andrew is a speaker on the world circuit and John is an entrepreneur.

A high school dropout who went on to great business success, Andrew became a highly sought-after motivational speaker, impacting thousands of people on almost every continent. He shared the platform with an array of equally successful business leaders and celebrities. However, disillusioned by the insincerity he witnessed 'behind the curtain', he finally left his financially lucrative career.

After three decades of incredible success on a global stage, Andrew ultimately found he had no one significant to share it with.

John, a 'self-made' businessman and entrepreneur, built a national financial planning franchise that became one of the most successful of its time. After almost losing his marriage and children, closely followed by a near-fatal car accident, John sold the company he founded to focus on helping others find fulfillment in life.

We don't lead in a vacuum. Fostering successful relationships is the key to building relationships that help to effectively manage up and down, build organizational trust, increase staff engagement, and empower collaboration. We are also seeing a stronger link between the quality of a leader's relationships

outside of work and how this impacts key relationships at work.

As leaders, we must recognize, develop, and prioritize relationships, inside and outside the work context, to withstand the reality of high-level leadership. Failure to attend to this most basic human need inevitably leads to disaster.



2. A CLEAR DEFINITION OF SUCCESS AND AN UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS

The capacity of leaders

Our emotional drivers or motivators are powerful when setting goals and taking steps to achieve them. They're heavily influenced by our passions and values and what inspires us. In addition, they're often directly linked to our calling, vision, and mission.

Because motivation is strongly linked to performance and personal fulfillment, understanding what drives us and our ability to discern that for others is key to increasing our leadership capacity.

Without a healthy understanding of our capacity, a slowdown or stop is perceived as losing momentum and productivity. Some in leadership live on the edge of their physical and mental capacity, and there is a genuine fear that others will see their vulnerabilities and insecurities and ‘jump ship’—why work for a leader who puts me or the place I work at risk?

On another level, there is the leader’s soul. Not the easiest to describe, but it’s where a leader’s core values, faith, and sense of purpose reside. When the soul of a leader is conflicted or put at risk, making good decisions becomes more challenging.

When our capacity is limited, our professional and personal well-being as a leader is threatened. It flies in the face of all we believe and have been told about leadership, and we need to be able to bridge the gap in understanding and outworking. If not, the implications can be far-reaching, not just at work but in our homes and the other places we do life.

3. COMMITMENT TO CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT THAT BUILDS CONFIDENCE AND RESILIENCE

Weathering life’s storms

Pain is part of the fabric of life. It just is. Storms will inevitably come, and how we choose to view them determines our response. Resilience is about not letting life’s darkest moments define future success. So, how do we tap into resilience in the moment? We do it by leveraging our whole story, not just the parts we believe are successful.

The leader’s value code

Every leader has a value code: intrinsic values that influence their behaviour and decision-making. These values represent how leaders want to be recognized and what they want to be known for. They are foundational to their personal brand and the organizational culture they want to create. At a deeper level, there is a question about the resiliency of a leader’s values in relation to performance.

Resilience is foundational to any leader’s success. Having a resilient character is more than just understanding what is important to you. It’s the ability to stand on that importance when you’re under pressure to compromise.

When a leader's character is questioned, it raises concerns about their reliability and, ultimately, their resilience. Once people enter a leadership role, it's generally only a matter of time before their values are challenged.

Building resilient character is not a simple task; it's a lifelong process. As leaders, we know how hard it can be to make decisions that affect those close to us, the people we work with, and the organizations we lead, but courage is a foundational virtue for a resilient character.

A commitment to developing integrity and personal character helps build confidence and resilience. Undertaking a personal audit helps leaders determine what is most important to them, and when leaders know themselves, they can look beyond their circumstances.

Rather than only focusing on what was lost, they learn to ask questions. For example, how can I leverage this to invest in relationships that enhance my well-being, productivity, sense of achievement and accomplishment, and resilience? And better yet, how can I leverage this to improve the well-being and success of others?



4. TRANSFORMING YOUR PERSONAL SCRIPT SO YOU CAN MAKE BETTER DECISIONS

Effective decision-making is foundational to success in leadership, business, and life. Our personal script drives what we believe about leadership, what it looks like, and how we respond. It is also intricately linked to our own self-identity and what we believe others expect from us.

The leader's personal script

Everyone enters adulthood with thought processes and behavior learned in childhood. Positive and negative experiences contribute significantly to how leaders think and behave, forming their personal 'script'.

Understanding how beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors impact decisions is not a top priority for many. For some, it's ignored entirely. As long as they get results, that's all that matters!

However, developing an awareness of your script gives you a behind-the-scenes look at what influences your decisions and how it directly impacts the degree to which you empower others to participate in key decisions.

Overcoming dysfunctional leadership patterns and writing a new leadership narrative gives greater clarity, insight, and the ability to view situations and people in a new light.

5. CREATING A NEW SUCCESS TRAJECTORY PERSONALLY, PROFESSIONALLY, AND CORPORATELY

The leader's trajectory

Here, we arrive at the final element in developing leaders with a healthy understanding of the reality of leadership. Where a leader believes they are headed, their trajectory in life and business will influence their model of leadership. This becomes an important reference point for those they lead and those watching.

Effective, courageous leadership can transform goals and outcomes — organizationally, professionally, and personally. But where there are competing goals, nobody wins.

Establishing goals as a measure of personal and corporate success is the norm, although surprisingly, not always practised. But why do some goals work and others don't? And significantly, for our purposes, are they based on a realistic understanding and outworking of leadership?

This leadership anchor combines the previous four anchors and provides a platform for setting goals that align with a leader's personal, professional, and organizational life. They should work together, not against each other. When they are in conflict, a leader's capacity is under stress.

CONCLUSION

Let's revisit the problem.

There is a gap, a disconnect, and at times, a yawning chasm between what we believe leadership is, what we're told it is, and the lived experiences of leaders.

Leaders are walking away, disillusioned by failure, disappointment, and hurt. The result is that massive latent leadership talent goes unleveraged, and we are all the poorer.

We're talking about a massive cultural shift that will take time to embed in businesses worldwide. But if we, as a leadership collective, talk about the reality of leadership and share our experiences of success, failure, highs, and lows without shame or blame, it's a good start.

Let's recap The 5 Leadership Anchors™.



1. The quality of your relationships

Leadership occurs in the context of relationships. For many leaders, an increase in responsibility leads to a [decline in the quality of their relationships](#).

Developing relationships inside and outside of work is key to helping leaders weather the inevitable storms of life and business while giving them the energy vital to achieving personal and organizational goals.

2. A clear definition of success and an understanding of your motivational drivers

Our emotional drivers or motivators are powerful when setting goals and taking steps to achieve them. How we [define success](#) is the root of what motivates us and is critical to increasing our

leadership capacity.

3. Commitment to character development that builds confidence and resilience

Resilience is about not letting life's darkest moments define future success. Every leader has a **value code**: intrinsic values influencing their behaviour and decision-making. When leaders know themselves, they can look beyond their circumstances. Clarifying our values helps to create confidence, focus and resilience, which are foundational to success.

4. Transforming your personal script so you can make better decisions

Effective decision-making is foundational to success in leadership, business, and life. Overcoming dysfunctional leadership patterns and writing a new narrative gives greater clarity and insight and empowers leaders to make healthy, effective decisions.

A leader's decision-making process is influenced by their **personal script**. Their personal script comprises the thought processes and behaviors learned as a child that remain into adulthood. These scripts either help or hinder our leadership capacity.

5. Creating a new success trajectory personally, professionally, and corporately

Where a leader believes they are headed, their trajectory in life and business will influence their leadership model. Effective, courageous leadership can transform goals and outcomes—organizationally, professionally, and personally. Clarifying our purpose and vision enables us to set goals with the power to transform outcomes. Rather than pursue **short-term fixes**, focusing our time and energy on transformational goals will yield a far greater return.

We—You—have an opportunity to lead with authenticity, and to close the gap between the misconceptions of leadership that many have (including our own) and what you are modelling. References

¹ General Stanley McChrystal, Jeff Eggers and Jason Mangone, *Leaders: Myth and Reality*, Kindle Edition, 2018, xi.