

Karen Meager and
John McLachlan

real leaders

A PRACTICAL
GUIDE TO
THE ESSENTIAL
QUALITIES OF
EFFECTIVE
LEADERSHIP

"Not just a game changer but also a life changer.
There's no better guide for anyone who wants to
unleash their true leadership potential."

Colin Murdoch, chief business officer, DeepMind

Karen Meager and
John McLachlan

A PRACTICAL
GUIDE TO
THE ESSENTIAL
QUALITIES OF
EFFECTIVE
LEADERSHIP

| real leaders

Real Leaders

ISBN 978-1-912300-88-4 (paperback)

eISBN 978-1-912300-89-1

Published in 2022 by Right Book Press

Printed in the UK

© Karen Meager & John McLachlan 2022

The right of Karen Meager and John McLachlan to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A CIP record of this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

We want to acknowledge the influence,
impact and support of all our former and
current business colleagues, academic trainers,
friends, students and clients. You have all been
and continue to be our teachers.

Karen & John

Contents

Introduction	ix
Part 1 – The Foundations of Real Leaders	
1: The real leaders model	3
2: Emotional regulation	17
Part 2 – Real Leaders, Real Problems	
3: Never enough time	39
4: Leading people isn't easy	51
Part 3 – The Five Key Leadership Traits of Real Leaders That Everyone Can Develop	
5: Awareness	69
6: Courage	89
7: Resilience	105
8: Trustworthiness	119
9: Collaboration	135
Part 4 – Taking it into the Real World	
10: Making it real	161
References	171

Introduction

Society is in a tricky place right now. The world is more diverse and complex than ever. We wrote these words eight years ago in the introduction to the previous edition of this book, *Real Leaders for the Real World*, and it's as true, if not more so, today. With the spread of and access to information being faster and broader than ever, gone are the days when people just do as they're told. For every fact there is a counterargument, and for every right way there are problems and complications. Top-down authoritarian leadership is now widely condemned as outdated and ineffective in today's organisations.

The problem is that, as a society, we haven't done a very good job in nurturing the next generation of good leaders because most of us don't naturally have what is required. There are few examples of good leadership. This doesn't necessarily mean that the leaders we have are bad people, but the whole realm of leadership is often seen as some mysterious arena where only strong, fearless, special

people live. Countless leadership books seem to support this, but this is not our experience.

Working with many leaders over many years, we see that people who are given the title of leader, or are in a place of authority, have the same problems and issues as the rest of us. Many are plagued with self-doubt, conflicting priorities and communication difficulties. Everyone, therefore, has the potential to lead. There is no one formula for the 'perfect leader', and in this book we will show you how you can develop your own style. It is written as a pragmatic, practical handbook for existing leaders who want to develop their own authentic style and for those aspiring leaders who may not currently see themselves as natural leaders.

For the first edition, we completed research with more than 60 leaders from a wide spectrum of organisations. For this second edition we wanted to bring the original research up to date so we re-ran the research with current leaders. Our new research has shown that little has changed over the past eight years; the same problems exist and the same core leadership traits matter. When we published the first edition, our concepts were considered leading edge, even a bit controversial. At the time, the concept of authentic leadership was in the early stages of gaining traction in academia. Since then, there has been an avalanche of books, models, acronyms and theories on the topic. Despite this increased attention, in the real world of organisations little seems to have changed. The reason for this is not because leaders lack the willingness to develop their style. The reason is that the plethora of information out there tells you what is important

in leadership, but it doesn't tell you how to do it – and doing it is hard.

Our focus in this book is on the how – it's called a practical guide for a reason. We won't waste pages convincing you why you need to develop these traits; you can read this anywhere in leadership literature. Instead, this book will help you gain awareness of where you may want to develop and provide you with a variety of ways to do it.

REVIEW COPY

Part 1
**THE FOUNDATIONS OF
REAL LEADERS**

Chapter 1

The real leaders model

Leader. Now there's a word that can generate a strong reaction in most of us and lead to arguments around any dinner table or post-work pub get-together. What makes a good leader, and what makes a bad one? Does the world need leaders who are strong, single minded and driven to get things done quickly or leaders who are flexible, able to listen to everyone's opinions and who take time to reflect and consider before making decisions?

We suspect your answer will reflect what you believe, how you have been brought up and your experience of leadership up to this point. If you look around you, you will see many examples of leaders – some good, some not so good. How you judge a good or bad leader is dependent on your point of view because to judge anything you need to process it in your own head, connect it up with what you already understand from your life experiences and what you value and believe about the world. As the rational, intelligent

beings most of us believe we are, we will, of course, be in possession of many facts, statistics and evidence that will clearly demonstrate that our point of view is correct. While many people can agree on what makes a bad leader, agreement on the traits of good leadership is much less consistent. Research provides useful general theory around effective leadership styles; however, the practical applications can be of limited use to those working in organisations on a day-to-day basis.

Think about someone you believe to be a good leader. Why do you think they are a good leader? What aspects of their behaviour are you focusing on, admiring, valuing?

Myth-buster: objectivity

There's no such thing as an objective view; there are only degrees of subjectivity. The minute we take something inside ourselves we make it subjective, and it's influenced by our own feelings, experiences, beliefs and values. Having more data than someone else about a topic or having more people who agree with you does not make it objective; it just makes it acceptable to more people.

What is leadership?

Throughout history, leadership has been important and revered. For some, it is Churchill's 'fighting on the beaches'; for some, Boudicca standing up for her beliefs and paying the ultimate price; and for others, it's Martin Luther King Jr and his dream. The thing about

tales of great leaders is that they are inspirational and suggest qualities that no one else has. They imply that only the chosen few will be great leaders and that the skills to do it are rare, given to you at birth, or your destiny. Think Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* films. Given who his father was, there was little doubt he was the chosen one!

While the world is getting smaller in terms of travel and communication, it is getting bigger in terms of opportunities and challenges. Now the future of the planet is dependent on us all doing our bit. It's no longer only big governments and organisations that have the ability, structural size and capability to make an impact in the world. With the amazing speed of technological development and so many ways to connect with people, anyone can make an impact in the world – and more of us need to. Even one person can be the leader in their niche. Countless YouTube phenomena are testimony to this.

Definitions of leadership (for what it's worth)

What is a leader? Is there a set of criteria that equals 'good leader'? Is it about skills, is it personality, is it something you are born with or develop? Dictionary definitions are usually a good place to start.

Dictionary definitions of the word leader

Oxforddictionaries.com: 'The person who leads or commands a group, organisation or country.'

Dictionary.com: 'A person or thing that leads; a guiding or directing head; a person who guides.'

Well, that's not hugely enlightening. So, let's try something else. What about the synonyms of leader?

Synonyms of leader

Thesaurus.com: boss, captain, chief, commander, conductor, counsellor, director, doyen, eminence, forerunner, general, governor, guide, head, luminary, manager, pilot, pioneer, shepherd, superior.

You can see from the synonyms that there are lots of different types of leaders and you can already recognise that the skills required to be a commander are different from those of a counsellor; and the skills of a pioneer compared to those of a manager or a director differ from those required by a shepherd. In this book we're asking you to think about what kind of leader you are and want to be and will give you the tools and ideas to develop your style – the style that fits you.

Leadership research

The purpose of our study of leaders for the first edition was to identify what leaders have in common, what aspects of their leadership they find challenging and what's important to them. When we began reviewing the responses, we were struck by the common themes that emerged, despite the differences in the people completing the study.

As we mentioned in the introduction, we have since run the study again. The world of leadership development has changed a lot in the past eight years, and we wanted to see how leadership experiences have changed along with that. The demographics have

shifted slightly from the original research with more female respondents and an increase in leaders with children living at home. Here's how they have changed:

	2014	2022
Gender	48% male, 52% female	38% male, 60% female, 2% prefer not to say
Children living at home	36%	60%
Age range	70% were aged between 40 and 60	68% were aged between 40 and 60

The overwhelming message in the original study was that leaders face a common set of problems and challenges and that there are a set of key traits that good leaders either have or are striving to achieve. We were a little surprised that, in the 2022 study, these themes were very similar. It seems that, while there are many more theories, concepts and buzzwords in the field of leadership, the essence of the reality of leadership, on the ground in organisations, has not changed.

The study consisted of an online questionnaire incorporating a multiple-choice section and a free-text section. The multiple-choice section featured personality and profiling questions, including: leaders' motive drivers, using the work of Harvard psychologist David McClelland (1987); learning style preferences; and working style preferences, including whether they work in big picture or detail, how they make decisions and how they approach problem-solving. The questions

were drawn from existing, recognised working style questionnaires that are commonly used in organisations. The purpose of these was to ascertain whether there were dominant styles present in the leaders and whether these differed from the published preferences for the population as a whole. The results indicated that the leaders profiled in line with the general population with a few small exceptions. In short, they were human.

The main differences between the general population profile and the leaders in our study were that leaders in the study profiled as:

1. Being driven by constant improvement and solving complex problems more than the general population.
2. Wanting to pay attention to the big picture and the details, but with the big picture first. The general population is more heavily skewed to preferring one or the other.
3. Taking more time to reflect on things before taking action. The general population is slightly more skewed towards action.

There are a few things to make clear here. First, while the shift away from the general population benchmarks was relatively small (between 10 and 15 per cent), it is significant enough to warrant closer scrutiny, and this was consistent across both studies conducted eight years apart.

Second, while these are perhaps the natural style differences of the leaders we studied, they can be developed by anyone. The motivational drive towards complex problems and constant improvement is potentially harder to develop as a skill as motivational drivers are considered to be more intrinsic to someone's

personality, but you could develop your attitude to these drives if you chose to. Everyone, however, can learn to move between the big picture and detail and learn to reflect appropriately and avoid rushing into problem-solving mode too soon. We will show you how in this book.

The free-text questions in the study covered what leaders liked and disliked about their roles, their current areas of development and the core challenges they were currently facing.

Questions asked in the study

- ✧ Which aspects of what you do in your leadership position are enjoyable?
- ✧ Which aspects of what you do in your leadership position do you dislike?
- ✧ What would you describe as your keys to success?
- ✧ What are the main challenges you face in life in general (i.e. not just in this context)?
- ✧ Which qualities do you admire in other people?
- ✧ Which qualities do you dislike in other people?
- ✧ What would you consider to be your main area(s) of self-development at the moment?
- ✧ In your leadership role, what is important to you? What drives you?

We analysed the answers using a qualitative research approach called thematic analysis. We coded the answers into types of traits, then grouped them together in themes, giving us our core model for

leadership development in this book: the real leaders model. We also used content analysis to count the number of times certain subjects commonly associated with leadership were mentioned. Examples of this are time management and people-related issues. We have referenced some of the most frequently mentioned themes in the appropriate chapters throughout the book and used this analysis to inform Part 1, which focuses on common problems leaders talked about. Throughout the book we've also captured excerpts of the verbatim answers that leaders provided.

Those of you familiar with the first edition will notice that the labels for the traits have been updated to make them easier to connect with. They are, however, consistent with the first edition. It's easy to find a truckload of *Harvard Business Review* articles and research that tells you what you need to be a good leader. But what we've found over our many years of working with leaders in organisations and is borne out by our own research is that people still find it hard to do these things and do them consistently. That's because it's hard! It's like saying to be a good leader you must be a perfect human – which, of course, no one can be.

We're coming at this from a slightly different perspective. We believe that you are human first and foremost and any development of your own leadership style must be grounded in who you are. You then adjust and tweak your attitude and behaviour from this base so that your leadership style becomes more congruent with who you are and, frankly, is just easier to do. This congruence will also make the world of difference to the people you are leading, the quality of your work and your ability to deliver.

Our new survey also reaffirmed the common problems and challenges from the original research: those potentially unresolvable dilemmas of life, time and difficult behaviours. We will look at the degree to which they are unresolvable and explore some ways in which you can begin to manage and even overcome these problems and challenges in Part 2.

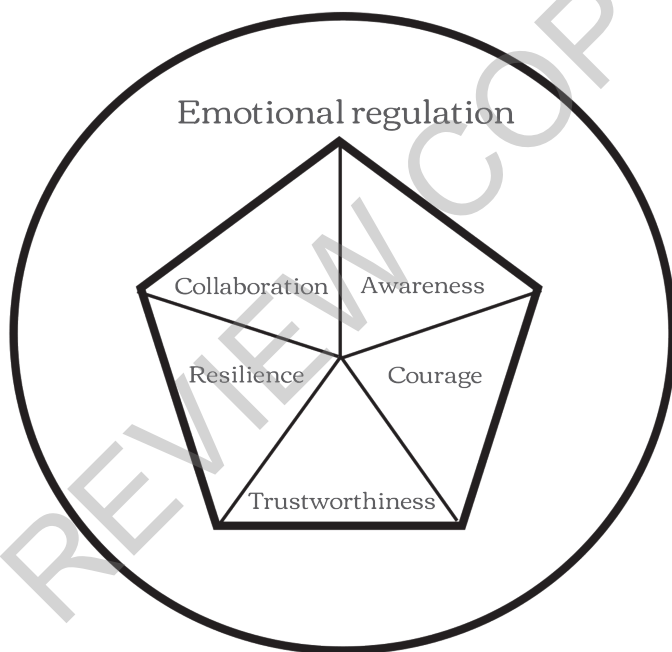
Introducing the real leaders model

The real leaders model was developed from the research. It focuses on five key traits that leaders in our research admired, were looking to develop or felt were keys to their success. The key traits identified are **awareness**, **courage**, **resilience**, **trustworthiness** and **collaboration**. They are defined more specifically in the table below:

Awareness	Courage	Resilience	Trustworthiness	Collaboration
The ability to use the available data to make good judgements	The ability to take considered risks towards your goals	The ability to focus on moving forward while being flexible and responsive to new information	The ability to be reliable, consistent and act with integrity	The ability to develop real relationships with the people you work with

These traits are complex and, while you may be able to do all of them in some circumstances, some of the time, doing them consistently and with congruence requires something else: emotional regulation. When we wrote about emotional regulation in the first edition, it was a term hardly heard of in leadership circles. At that time, it was seen more in the realms of therapy and its importance

in organisations often had to be explained. Now, the term is more commonly used, demonstrating how far the world has come in understanding the emotional underpinnings of everyday behaviours. It's also the reason why, in the real leaders model below, emotional regulation encircles all the other traits. Without it, leaders cannot make these traits their own and model them with congruence and a degree of ease. This is why we consider it's likely to be *the* most essential piece of leadership development you will ever undertake.



The real leaders model

Before diving into emotional regulation, another important concept to understand to help you to develop the traits in the real leaders model is the formula for behavioural change. To develop as a leader will require some degree of change.

The AMC behavioural change model

If you want to change your own behaviour or help others to change theirs, there are three key components that need to be addressed so that the change is congruent, authentic and long lasting. We created the awareness, motivation and choices (AMC) behavioural change model to explain the components needed for change and to support leaders and coaches in helping their teams and clients create enduring change. The model can be expressed as a formula:

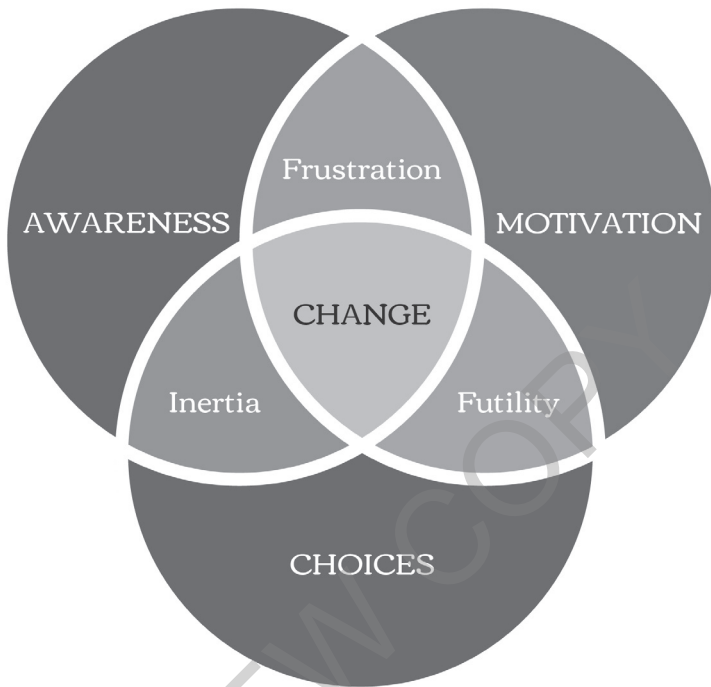
awareness + motivation + choices = CHANGE

To change, you need awareness. You need to make clear to yourself what specifically you need to change. This may seem obvious but often people try to change something without a full understanding of what specifically needs to change, even if they've had feedback from other people about it. A good example of this is when people are told they need to be more present in meetings or think more strategically. They might agree with the feedback but are often confused as to what exactly they're supposed to do about it. To support the change, we often ask people to go back and find out what people are observing. For example, are they coming across as distracted in meetings because they're looking at their laptop? Do they come up with mainly tactical solutions to problems rather than considering the bigger picture?

To change, you also need to be motivated to do it. You might agree that you're not a particularly strategic thinker, but you might also not really understand the benefit of strategic thinking, nor believe it will make

any real difference. The key aspect of motivation is that it must be truly motivating for you, personally, to be effective. If you only think a new skill is quite interesting, sounds sensible or is something your manager has suggested, how are you going to persuade yourself to put in the required effort to do something differently? Think about how this change will help you. Will it make you more impactful? Able to complete things faster? Get you more recognition for your work? Will it make work more enjoyable? Improve the quality of what you do? Motivation is a personal thing and if you realise you're not in touch with what really motivates you at a deep level, it's worth exploring this with a coach or mentor.

Finally, you might have awareness of what needs to change and be really motivated to change but have no idea how to do it. What's more, people who do change successfully recognise that there's always more than one way to do something. You need choice. To have choice you need a range of options that are appropriate to the situation and congruent with your style and skills. For example, if you want to have more impact, there's no point trying to crack audacious jokes in your presentation if you're introverted. That will come across as incongruent and will probably have the opposite effect. You could instead think about using fun visuals, telling an entertaining story or showing a video to create impact. Often people think there's one right or best solution but in fact there are many equally effective ways to achieve something. Having choice involves carefully considering all the appropriate options and deciding which way works best for you. That's why we present several options for developing each of the leadership traits throughout the book.



The AMC behavioural change model

You need all three of these to effect deep-rooted change. If you have awareness and motivation with no choice, you'll feel frustrated. Motivation and choice with no awareness is futile because you'll keep trying new things with no idea what to change or if the changes are working or not. Awareness and choice with no motivation breeds inertia. Someone who has awareness and choices but no motivation will continue to find reasons, justifications and excuses not to change. These reasons will, of course, all be plausible, but essentially they'll continue to do nothing and the situation will remain unchanged. This isn't intended to

harshly judge people who lack motivation, as everyone has things they don't feel motivated to do. However, it's important to recognise that the motivation to change comes from within, and often good leaders dig deep and find the energy to be bothered about something they're not particularly excited about but recognise the long-term benefits of. We will talk about this further in the chapter on resilience.

How to use this book

The structure of the book will guide you through the AMC model of behavioural change. For each section we will first consider what you need to be aware of, then consider what might motivate you to develop this trait and finally take you through several choices for developing these for yourself.

The book is also presented in the order we believe will be easiest and most effective to help you learn, but not necessarily the order in which you'll want to take action. We suggest you read through the whole book first and then go back and use the chapter that is most relevant either to the issues you're facing or the area of development you want to focus on. Throughout we have used client examples to help you with the practical application of the concepts. These are all real situations and have been used with permission, but we have kept the names anonymous to respect client confidentiality.

This world needs you! We need more, better developed and more capable leaders on this planet making a difference, and we want you to be one of them.

What makes an effective leader?

It's a popular belief that the world of leadership is some mysterious arena where only the strong, fearless and gifted can survive.

But this isn't necessarily true, and it's certainly not been the experience of organisational psychologists Karen Meager and John McLachlan.

In **Real Leaders**, Karen and John unpack and examine the psychological and behavioural traits that characterise many great leaders.

Through an accessible mix of pragmatic and practical guidance, they demonstrate how to adopt and adapt these common attributes, develop your own authentic leadership style and – whether you're an existing or an aspiring leader – coach you on how you can elevate your skills and create success.

Eye-opening new research carried out for this fully revised second edition underlines how leaders are, above all, human. They don't fall into standard leadership stereotypes or a one-size-fits-all approach.

Using a powerful range of updated concepts and models, it's now easier than ever for you to evolve and grow as you harness the essential qualities of effective leadership.

"Really practical, easy to understand and supported with tools which will help you grow and have real impact as an authentic and human leader in a complex world."

Michelle Harradence, director of learning, Carnival UK

"A great read! It explains complex topics in a way that you'll be able to apply in the messy, real world we live in."

Colin Kennedy, CEO, ICS Learn Group

eBOOK
also available



LEADERSHIP

ISBN 978-1-912300-88-4



9 781912 300884 >