



Self-Leadership

“If you want to
change the
world, start
with yourself.”

Mahatma Gandhi



Mahatma Gandhi believed deeply in the possibilities of self-growth. In this, he saw a truth which has echoed through human history: if we are ever to make an impact on the world, we must first change ourselves. And leadership is no different.

The first step on any journey of leadership is inwards. And this is what we call self-leadership. How are we leading ourselves in the world? Both in the ways we are acting, and the ways we are thinking. Over time, we can learn to lead ourselves in ways which allow us to thrive and serve others as well. But it starts with us.

What Is Self-Leadership?

“I want, by understanding myself, to understand others. I want to be all that I am capable of becoming.”

Katherine Mansfield

So, before we even begin to think about how we can lead others, we must turn our gaze inwards to the actor who struts and frets upon the stage of life. Who am I? What are my ways of being in the world? How do I show up in my understanding, perspectives and reactions to my context and environment?

Leading self is about understanding the human experience and the organising principles of the mind, and then exploring how we interpret, react, and respond to situations. Elevating our self-leadership is building our capacity to reflect upon and transform our thinking, emotions, and behaviours, and leveraging them to serve ourselves and the system around us.

Effective self-leadership is what broadens our range of options in how we respond to the world.

If we lack self-leadership, our potential responses to a situation are narrowed down to an ever-dwindling pool, determined by our prejudices and triggers. Only through effective self-leadership can we fully identify potential and create personal and professional growth for ourselves and for others. And so, all leadership begins with leadership of self.

Unpacking Self-Leadership

“The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener.”

Bill O'Brien

What is central to self-leadership is coming to see ourselves more clearly. Self-leadership requires us to attune to our own way of being through examining how we react in the moment (from our thoughts to our emotions, to our body). The greater our attention to this process, the more we are able to either let it continue or change it. This, in turn, allows us to choose how we perceive the world around us, and consider multiple perspectives that could serve ourselves, those around us, and the broader systems of which we are a part.

In breaking this process down, we like to think about three dimensions of self-leadership:

- **Self-awareness** – our knowledge of ourselves and capacity to perceive how we think and act. This means understanding the psychological and physiological underpinnings of our behaviour.
- **Mindfulness** – being present in the moment to observe and modify our actions. This means being about to step back in a situation, observe ourselves, and choose a response rather than reacting uncritically.
- **Self-care** – maintaining our self and our resilience so that we can serve others. This means tuning into what we need to do to take care of ourselves over time, and what strategies we can use to build our wellbeing, to facilitate our self-leadership.

Of course, these dimensions work in combination with each other and are mutually reinforcing. Mindfulness enables us to step back and observe the bodily reactions and emotions in the moment, which could point us to underlying assumptions and stories we may be telling ourselves about that moment (i.e., self-awareness). Self-care boosts our capacity to be mindful, and self-awareness points us to what we need to do to take care of ourselves.

How do we apply it for Leaders

“Know thyself”

Socrates

Digging into the foundational components of self-leadership, we can take a number of practical steps to improve our self-leadership capabilities:

Self-awareness

Self-awareness comes through educating ourselves. We need to understand the different influences on our thoughts and behaviours, both that of nature and nurture. Nature requires a grounding in cognitive psychology, while nurture is understanding how our own culture, past experience and history have contributed to the person we are and how we show up. Overlaid across this, is seeing how these influences specifically manifest in the work-context.

It is not always enough just to know these things can happen, but to understand how they are happening in us. We can build our self-awareness with:

- Cognitive and leadership assessment tools
- 360 Reviews and other performance assessments
- Personal Coaching or counselling

Mindfulness

There's no real quick fix when it comes to mindfulness. Mindfulness is a matter of practice. Often, we start practicing in a quiet moment, parsing what we are experiencing in the here and now without judgment or concern. The more we develop this capability though, the more we can be mindful when we are in stressful or 'busy' situations. This is the real 'on-the-ground' skill which will allow us to meet situations with the grace and purposefulness we want. Rather than being swept up in our default reactions, we can ask whether they are serving us and choose our response. We can also turn to the age-old wisdom of practices such as meditation and yoga.

Self-care

Self-care is the suite of mindsets and skills we need to enable us to self-lead. If we are run-down, lacking in confidence or unhappy, we will struggle to direct positive energy to ourselves or others. Self-care has a number of components. We need to have a strong sense of self-esteem - thinking of ourselves positively. We also need self-compassion – relating to ourselves kindly, and embracing ourselves as we are, flaws and all. Building up our resilience toolkit will also support us to self-care. Think about what replenishes you and your energy, and then go and do it!

Challenges/Opportunities

Most of us are familiar with the challenges to self-leadership – often, our behavioural patterns can be deeply ingrained, and we may not even notice them, let alone be able to change them. Modern society is particularly good at diverting our attention away from self-reflection to many other distractions. Self-leadership is hard work and requires commitment to the task of understanding, and then changing, our habitual ways of being in the world. But the results are well worth it.

By developing the three dimensions of self-leadership, over time we can lead ourselves to more regenerative, impactful, and human-centred ways of being. In turn, this enables us to lead our systems and networks towards achieving a greater purpose and living our values. It all starts with the self.





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