

KOEN MARICHAL AND JESSE SEGERS

19

CHALLENGING  
**THOUGHTS**  
ABOUT  
LEADERSHIP



acco

# 19 challenging thoughts about leadership

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# Contents

## Foreword

**Bosses, dogs, leaders and initiative-takers (Prof. Dr. Jaap Boonstra) 7**

## Introduction

**What is our hope? 11**

- 1. If you think saying good morning to your people is a waste of time, think again 17**  
About benevolence and connection
- 2. Leadership is shared. More like a jazz band 23**  
About collaboration and a collective approach
- 3. Tasks are performed better when they are chosen 29**  
About self-determination and motivation
- 4. The job of the leader is to help teams to continue to win 33**  
About teams and results
- 5. If you fill the room, how can your people grow? 39**  
About self-awareness and empowerment
- 6. Leadership is acknowledging the elephant in the room 45**  
About responsibility and change
- 7. In sameness we connect, in differences we grow 51**  
About diversity and homogeneity
- 8. Leadership develops self confidence in everyone 57**  
About development and mindset
- 9. The context makes the leader 63**  
About context and humility
- 10. Leadership is a personal claim 69**  
About freedom and choice

<b>11. Leadership starts by giving, not by asking favors</b>	<b>73</b>
About influence and reciprocity	
<b>12. Trust is the power of leadership</b>	<b>79</b>
About trust, power and authority	
<b>13. Leadership creates the context for optimal tension</b>	<b>85</b>
About stability and renewal	
<b>14. Leadership is moral. Are you sincere or just pulling the strings?</b>	<b>91</b>
About authenticity and integrity	
<b>15. Leadership works with the system, not against it</b>	<b>97</b>
About systemic thinking and politics	
<b>16. Leadership is making this world a better place</b>	<b>103</b>
About spirituality and sustainability	
<b>17. Leadership talks the walk</b>	<b>107</b>
About exemplary behaviour and sensemaking	
<b>18. Leadership is all about having your own story, and being true to it</b>	<b>113</b>
About storytelling and identity	
<b>19. What's your story?</b>	<b>119</b>
About developing your own leadership	
<b>Appendix. Towards an integrated model of leadership and leadership development</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Biographies of the interviewed leaders</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>End notes</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Key references</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Testimonials</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>Epilogue (Herman Van Rompuy)</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>153</b>

# Bosses, dogs, leaders and initiative-takers

A dog has a master, a boss. From its boss, the dog receives water, food and attention. It is even allowed to go and play outside! In return, the boss expects loyalty and sometimes a little amusement. Dogs are dependent on their bosses. People, however, are not dogs. People are their own bosses. A healthy person is perfectly capable of arranging his (or her) own life, of making decisions, of taking initiatives. But in organizations people sometimes have someone above them, someone who behaves as a boss. They are given instructions from 'upstairs', from someone higher in the hierarchy. This boss, like the dog's master, expects good behaviour and obedience. People who behave like a boss kill initiative and creativity in others. Bosses create dependence and a wait-and-see attitude. If you make people dependent on you, you also become responsible for them. You deprive them of their own sense of responsibility. Many bosses are weighed down by the heavy burden of responsibility they have assumed from others.

This current era of uncertainty and unpredictability demands that people should show initiative, responsibility and creativity. Initiative is necessary to deal flexibly with the insecurities and changing circumstances of modern life. By taking responsibility, people can give their own shape and form to their professional activities, allowing them to achieve better results. Creativity is essential for finding new ways forward in these confusing times. People become their own leaders, when they take control of their own lives and the situation in which they live and work. Everyone is capable of taking the initiative to work for a new and better future. Everyone is capable of encouraging others to do the same. Taking the lead and looking forward to the future generates energy and optimism that helps to inspire both yourself and the people around you.

Initiative-takers are people who take the lead and inspire others with their dream and their vision of the future. They give direction and space to these others. You can sometimes find leaders of this kind at the top of organizations. You can certainly find them amongst professionals who are bursting with passion and ideas. Everyone can take the initiative and everyone can be a leader.

People who lead in this manner are aware of their surroundings, of the people around them, and of their own strengths and weaknesses. This awareness of the surrounding environment is essential if you ever want to achieve change. You can only act proactively if you understand what is going on around you, in the market and in your customer's minds. Change is looking forward, predicting the future. Having a vision of this future creates support and commitment, generates flexibility, and encourages people to work to achieve that future. It helps if this vision reflects the ambitions of those who you hope to lead towards this bright, new day. And by 'awareness of your surroundings' we do not simply mean the environment of the organization you work for, but also your immediate personal work environment, the context in which you operate day by day.

Social awareness means that you invest in others and that you are prepared to open yourself to the experiences and points of view of the people around you. It is the art of temporarily suspending your own judgement and opinions, so that you can first discover what makes the other person so valuable and unique. By giving honest and positive feedback and by showing appreciation for the efforts they have made, you can strengthen others both in who they are and in what they are able to contribute to your common vision.

As an initiative-taker and leader, it is also important to develop your own self-awareness. You must know who you are and where you come from. This starts by understanding and accepting your personal biography. What are the important places and events in your life? Who were the people who helped to make you what you are today? What are your fears? What are you good at? What are you bad at? It is important to reflect on the things that have always fascinated you, have occupied your thoughts, have made you curious. What gives you energy and what gives you rest? What were the best and happiest moments in your life so far?

In order to get to know yourself better, you sometimes need to step outside your comfort zone to explore new places and new cultures. This will allow you to appreciate different perspectives and see new possibilities. In the final analysis, it all boils down to three core questions. Who am I and what do I want? What is my current significance and what significance do I want to have in the future? Who do I want to connect with and how do I want to communicate with them? Three simple questions – but the answers are often a lot more complex!

This book contains fascinating and illustrative stories about leadership. They are stories that invite you to look at your own leadership qualities, inspire you to take initiative and challenge you to accept the adventure of responsibility. They are stories that will also help you to find answers to the questions posed above. Each story is based on careful observation and reliable experience. But each story is also based on scientific insights. As a result, the book combines a pleasing frivolity with

scientific robustness. And it is precisely this combination that makes the book so interesting and encourages you to look at leadership in a different way, so that you can further develop your own leadership potential and the leadership potential of others. Because it is in collaboration with others that leadership truly blossoms, allowing us to follow those new pathways that lead towards a brighter future for us all.

Jaap Boonstra

Professor of Organizational Change and Leadership

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# Introduction

## What is our hope?

There is no shortage of leaders. We need new concepts of leadership. The old concept revolves around the dominant leader, who accepts final responsibility, decides on the direction to be taken, provides order, and takes charge in moments of crisis. This concept is still prevalent in the modern business world, and is often to be found in the hierarchical structure of many organizations. The higher up the ladder you are, the more power you have and the better you are paid, so that you can 'take the lead' or 'be the boss'. Bosses of this kind look down on their people, trying to 'lead' them to the best of their ability. This means that their people are looking in the opposite direction: up towards the boss, looking to him (or her) for direction, motivation and protection. They seek approval, striving to do their best to fulfil the expectations of 'them upstairs'.

This paradigm of reciprocal, hierarchic dependence is outdated and outmoded. Bosses are frustrated because their people are unwilling to take responsibility and are not entrepreneurial enough. And vice versa: people have lost confidence in their bosses. Or do you still have a boss who knows everything and takes good care of his team? Do you really still expect your CEO to deliver a message of salvation about how the crisis can be overcome?

Hierarchy is also functioning less and less within society as a whole. Politicians are finding it increasingly hard to maintain their credibility. Teachers and doctors can no longer lay down the law to pupils and patients. Even in the relationship between parents and children there is less unity and less authority than there once was.

Nevertheless, we continue to cling on to the old concept of leadership. People still need guidance, don't they? Surely someone has to take the lead? And so we continue to make the same old mistakes in the same old way. Entrepreneurs who continue to struggle heroically and single-handedly with the problems confronting them, until they become hopelessly entangled in the web of their own ego. Managers who will not allow their staff to experiment, because their ideas have not been 'validated'. Leaders who feel so superior that they undermine the self-confidence of their subordinates. Directors who work day and night in the hope that they will one day be able to satisfy all the expectations of all their stakeholders. Mayors

who think that their task is to 'give orders', thereby reducing their administrative departments to the role of ciphers, implementers without influence or initiative. Doctors who stubbornly refuse to work in an inter-disciplinary manner.

The alternative to these unsatisfactory situations is a shared and authentic style of leadership, which is non-hierarchical and based on voluntary participation. This type of leadership results in shared responsibility. There is an African saying that 'It takes a village to raise a child'. Organisations can also become villages, with everyone contributing towards satisfying the needs of a customer or solving a particularly difficult problem. Not because they are obliged to and not because someone tells them to, but simply because they want to, based on their own commitment to the matter in question. In organizations of this kind, hierarchical planning, guidance and control go hand in hand with authentic collaboration on a basis of trust and equality in the service of a common goal. This new concept of leadership is therefore very different from the old idea of individual leadership based on authority alone.

When we talk in this book about 'leaders' and 'leadership', we are not talking about the hierarchical function of a 'boss', a leadership figure. On the contrary. Our hope is that this book will accelerate the process that leads to greater independence from hierarchy: 'Follow the leader, not the boss!' We want you to develop the taste for taking initiative and showing leadership in your work environment, irrespective of your rank or position. By understanding that leadership starts with little things, and that it is perfectly normal to feel uncertain and insecure in the beginning. By shaking off the idea that leadership is something special for special people. By realizing that leadership has nothing to do with 'being the boss' or your position in the pecking order. The old style boss is on the way out. In these uncertain times we need true leadership – not bosses.

The new type of leadership is not easy to define. 'Follow the leader' also means 'follow the leader in yourself'. Leadership is a personal matter that none of us can determine for someone else. Consequently, this book will not be providing you with a model to which you need to conform. Leadership cannot be pigeon-holed in this manner. Self-awareness, a sense of reality, trust, confidence, freedom, development, values, courage, authenticity... They all play a role in differing degrees. In many respects developing leadership means developing yourself as a person. It is a conscious choice for personal growth. Leadership blossoms within the context of your life story.

## How can you use this book?

Our book is a patchwork of 19 different challenging thoughts. Each thought deals with a specific leadership theme, illustrated with theory, practical examples and personal testimonies. The quotations are drawn from in-depth conversations we conducted with influential leaders. They are listed at the end of the book, with a short biography of each one. The academic and scientific references can be consulted in the end notes, which can likewise be found at the back of the book. The 19 thoughts do not follow any logical order. You can read them independently from each other.

It also means that you can concentrate on your own interests and needs. Do you want to know more about the difference between leadership and power? Or are you primarily concerned with the ethical dimension of leadership? Or perhaps your personal focus is on authentic leadership and empowerment? Or maybe you are more concerned about the nature of trust and its implications? Just look in the table of contents or the index and you will be able to find what you want, whether it is examples for a workshop or presentation or just personal inspiration for your own development.

The 19 thoughts encourage discussion, debate, reflection and/or action. Each one ends with a series of thought-provoking questions and tips that will help you to improve your leadership skills for that particular leadership theme. We suggest that you search for the insight that most interests you – and start there. Give that theme a central position in your personal development trajectory. Discuss it with your friends and colleagues. Integrate the tips into your daily working life. Use the same tips at the team and/or organizational level. Organize an open forum about one or more of the insights. Make leadership discussable. With this aim in mind, the book is also available as an app and as a series of cards that can facilitate discussions of this kind.

The 19 thoughts also offer a useful summary of current academic and scientific thinking about leadership. The ambition of this book is to approach leadership in a less intuitive and personal manner, focusing instead on scientific facts and evidence. While we have tried to make the book light and interesting to read, this must not hide the fact that it has a solid scientific basis. In an appendix, readers can find a model that integrates the diversity of the many different insights into a coherent framework with a logical structure.

## How did this book come about?

It was at the end of 2010 that we started our search for a new interpretation of leadership, which could add something to the way in which people carry out their day-to-day activities at work. What is leadership? What is successful leadership? How does leadership develop? These were our initial questions. What we did not want to do was create a model that would try to define – or rather confine – leadership to a number of specific competencies. We wanted to investigate leadership in a more fundamental manner and postpone the answers to our basic questions as long as possible, in order to maximize our understanding.

We are now three years further down the line. In the meantime, we have interviewed many leaders (whose biographies you can find at the end of the book). We have read dozens of academic tomes and scientific articles. We have worked with hundreds of managers and students, to help them unlock their leadership. We have given countless lectures and debated leadership with numerous groups, both large and small. We have taken part in online fora and written hundreds of blog-posts. We have started scientific research projects of our own. Above all, we have continued to discuss our subject, day after day after day.

Fortunately, we had each other. We appreciate each other's almost limitless critical faculties. And we never hesitate to call each other's opinions into question. It is an exceptional experience to lose yourself in a daily search for a greater truth, to experiment and take risks, in the simple expectation that at the end of each day you can share your story, safe in the knowledge that you will be supported and understood. And as our journey progressed, this became the essence of our message. You cannot achieve self-development alone. It is something you do with others. And it is exactly the same with leadership.

This frantic search for answers was not only tiring for us at times, but also for the people around us. We received feedback that we were being too critical, were never satisfied, always questioning our own assumptions and that our story was difficult to comprehend. But also that being authentic and passionate was our key strength. This feedback gave us pause for thought, but did not persuade us to change our method of working. Quite the reverse. We became even more strongly convinced of the rightness of our own DNA: satisfied-not satisfied, reflective action, co-creation. In the course of our investigations, we had developed our own identity.

Each step led to a new step. Each answer led to a new question. Our critical approach kept pushing us forward. Every so often, we had an aesthetic experience. At such moments, all the pieces of the puzzle seemed to fall into place, so that the overall picture gradually became clearer and clearer. With the help of many people,

our knowledge finally crystallized into 19 challenging thoughts and images about leadership.

The 19 thoughts turned into a widely viewed slide-share presentation. We received positive reactions and integrated them into our lectures. We made colour print-offs and used them as a deck of cards in workshops, in order to stimulate people and organizations to think more deeply about their leadership. We continued to tinker with our material, which resulted in a better and more closely reasoned second edition. This was printed professionally in a limited edition of 2,000 copies, which have in the meantime found their way into an equal number of offices, both at home and abroad. This led in turn to increasing demands to formalize the ideas behind our cards in a book. The thoughts became this book.

Amongst other things, leadership means letting go. The publication of our book means letting go of three years of intense effort and collaboration. But this, in turn, creates space for something new. We are certain that this 'something new' will, at least to some extent, be determined by you, our readers. So now it is your turn to say what you think. We wish you an enjoyable read and plenty of leadership pleasure!

Koen Marichal & Jesse Segers  
April 2013

1.

IF YOU THINK  
SAYING GOOD MORNING  
TO YOUR PEOPLE IS  
**A WASTE OF TIME,**  
**THINK AGAIN**



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**About benevolence  
and connection**

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# 1. About benevolence and connection

Louis<sup>1</sup> was responsible for a budget of more than 200 million euros and over a 1,000 people, working in a complex organization with internal and external customers, as well as numerous different reporting lines. He was not a man of great charisma, nor was he particularly dominant. You could pass him almost without noticing in the corridor, and you might even think him shabbily dressed. He was never tempted to make rash promises or drastic decisions, even during moments of crisis. It was precisely at such moments that he opted for consultation. He was not an inspirational speaker in front of large audiences. In fact, he manifestly failed to embody most of the norms that are usually associated with leadership. But there was one thing that made him unique: his benevolence. He greeted everybody in the same personal and interested manner, irrespective of their position in the organization. He thanked everyone at the end of every conversation, meeting or presentation and showed his appreciation for the efforts people had made. And he meant it. In addition to his expertise and brilliant analytical skills, it was this benevolence that was the essence of his influence within the company.

Research has confirmed the importance of this human aspect of leadership. ‘Giving individual consideration’ is one of the four basic behavioural characteristics of the transformational leader.<sup>2</sup> The other three dimensions are ‘providing intellectual stimulation’, ‘acting as a role model’ (see leadership insight 17) and ‘motivating people in an inspirational way’. Transformational leaders develop other people and make them stronger. They are not only task-oriented, but also people-oriented.

Individual consideration means that the leader listens to and takes account of the individual needs of the people with whom he or she works. He or she acts as a coach or mentor and assumes responsibility for the welfare and development of others. The leader shows empathy, gives support, is open in communication, shows respect and values every individual contribution and sign of progress. This behaviour creates an atmosphere of psychological safety and trust, which in turn leads to improved performance and personal development.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, listening and leadership go well together. But there is no point in listening if you are not hearing. Effective leaders listen closely to what people are actually saying. ‘Attention is the mystic prayer of the soul,’ said Rik Torfs, rector of the Catholic University of Leuven in a lecture on leadership, quoting the poet Paul Celan. ‘Giving your attention is the most important thing you can do. Only people who are able to give their attention in this manner are capable of leadership. Attention leads to a precise and correct description of what has happened.’<sup>4</sup>

Even so, in many conversations people are not really listening at all. They attempt to understand what the other person wants to say as quickly as possible. And as soon as they think they have understood, their attention begins to wander. From then on, they are listening without hearing. Their involvement in the conversation is restricted to what is useful, so that the other person feels himself ignored or misinterpreted. Put simply, they are only paying attention to their own agenda. Research has shown conclusively that this kind of task-oriented leadership is less effective and less motivating.<sup>5</sup>

‘First listen, then act’ is also the motto of Frans Colruyt, the COO Retail of the Colruyt Group. ‘I think that it is tremendously important to connect with the people you work with. I have been away from our head office for quite a while and on my return I noticed that lots of people no longer have eye-contact with each other. I could be wearing a bright orange sweater, but most of them still wouldn’t notice me! For me, that’s not done.’ Colruyt tries to bridge this distance during conversations and meetings by always looking for the human dimension: ‘How do you feel about that? How firmly are you behind this idea? Why do you want to do that?’ These questions serve to deepen the conversation and increase human contact. Colruyt uses his highly developed intuition to assess the depth and the quality of this connection, and then adjusts his approach accordingly.

“I am increasingly having normal conversations with my staff. If you want people to think for themselves and take ownership of their lives, you need to treat them as adults.”

*(Wouter De Geest, CEO BASF Antwerp)*

Success authors Goffee and Jones also think that connection and proximity are important in the type of leadership we need today. Leaders who are close to their people know them better, but are also more realistically and more correctly assessed themselves. On the other hand, Goffee and Jones also point out that: ‘Leadership is not a friendship contest’.<sup>6</sup> Proximity should not be confused with popularity. Leadership also needs distance. In this way, leaders show that they are striving for a higher purpose and want to achieve change. In particular if results are poor, keeping your proper distance as leader is crucial to bringing about the necessary transformation.

Goffee and Jones link the importance of dealing consciously with social distance to the delayering process taking place in many organizations. In hierarchical organizations it



was not necessary to be close to people. The organization's clearly defined functions ensured that people did what was asked of them. In today's modern world this 'leading from a distance' no longer works. Nowadays, employees need direct and real contact to allow them to perform at their best. Even so, a certain degree of distance is still necessary to maintain a view of the overall picture. This means that effective leaders must skilfully tread the fine dividing line between social distance and social proximity, depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Real human contact is essential for the development of trust. And trust is essential if you want people to take risks and bring about change (also see insight 12). It is no coincidence that innovative organizations allocate considerable time and resources to the creation of informal meeting opportunities. At Pixar and later at Apple, Steve Jobs insisted that coffee machines, internal post-boxes and even the toilets were central in the office lay-out, so that the number of chance encounters and informal contact moments could be maximized.<sup>7</sup>

Within the context of the new work ethos it is certainly important to devote sufficient attention to physical collaboration and spontaneous meetings. 'Leading from a distance' is a hollow concept and only works if it is highly task-oriented. Marissa Mayer, CEO at Yahoo, reached the same conclusion and for this reason she put the brake on working from home at the beginning of 2013, in order to strengthen the innovation capacity of her organization.

In short, leadership is a human phenomenon, and human beings are social creatures. Without contact and proximity there can be no trust, and trust is the indispensable basis for collaboration and change.

### Your leadership

How much attention do you pay to the person behind the function, project or strategy? In conversations, do you just listen or do you seek to understand? How aware are you of the need to deal carefully with the question of the social distance between you and your people? How flexible are you at keeping someone at a distance when it is necessary, but then getting close to them again when circumstances have changed?

### What can you do?

- Reduce the level of tension in your working activities. If you are over-tensed, you will have no margin for devoting the necessary attention to the human factor.
- Build in routines and plan free moments that allow you to have more informal contacts with people.
- Don't pretend. Informal conversations must never have a hidden agenda. If you want to ask a specific question or discuss a complaint, do so within a more formal context.
- Begin meetings with a 'checkin' moment or some 'white space'. Ask how people are doing. Shatter the illusion that people can work together in a hyper-efficient manner without really knowing each other.
- Create space and organize opportunities for informal encounters.
- Know your boundaries. If human contact is not really your thing, accept this as a limitation on your leadership.
- Don't allow yourself to get too close to the group you are responsible for.
- Consciously maintain a degree of distance, so that you can preserve your freedom of action.
- Work for organizations and directors who are prepared to devote time and attention to people. Distrust leaders who are only concerned with results and their own agenda.



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**About collaboration  
and a collective  
approach**

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People demonstrate leadership whenever they take responsibility for change in their environment, because they believe things can or must be different. Leaders have a personal story to tell. About the challenges in the real world. About their striving for higher ideals and their quest for a better future. They question the status quo, hold themselves and others up to the mirror, take the first steps towards change and further develop themselves as an example and instrument of that change. They have impact, not based on authority, but on authenticity and engagement.

Leadership is not the same as having a managerial position or exercising power. There is no job description for a leader. Leadership is a personal choice. The more people are willing to make this choice, the more quickly teams, organizations and societies with greater leadership will develop. This book contributes to this process by linking current scientific thinking about the complexity of leadership with a number of practical examples and personal testimonies. The result is 19 challenging thoughts or insights about the leadership phenomenon, which will encourage people to reflect personally and critically on their attitude to leadership and inspire them to take positive action.

**“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the best leader of them all?”**

**KOEN MARICHAL** lectures and researches in leadership at the Antwerp Management School. He has a master degree in psychology and more than 20 years HRM experience in different organizations.

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Together they lead The Future Leadership Initiative at the Antwerp Management School, which investigates and develops the leadership of both people and organizations. You can follow their blog at [www.tfli.be](http://www.tfli.be) and via twitter @koenmarichal and @segersjesse.

“This book contains fascinating and illustrative stories about leadership. They are stories that invite you to look at your own leadership, inspire you to take initiative and challenge you to accept the adventure of responsibility.”

Prof.dr. Jaap Boonstra in the Foreword

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