

Leadership Unraveled

Leesvoorbeeld

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Leadership Unraveled

**Handbook
for Leaders
in a Polarizing
World**

P E L C K M A N S

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*For Charlotte, Olivia, and Laura,
for Flor and Mira,
for Stijn and Jasper.*

*May they thrive in a world where we focus more on what unites us than on what divides us;
may they look at other people's potential and positive intentions;
may they build bridges between generations, cultures, and opinions;
may they show true leadership, whatever they do in life.*

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Introduction

Leesvoorbeeldjaar



“A lot of different flowers make a bouquet” is a famous Islamic proverb. It also serves as a beautiful representation of our society and our organizations. Never before have we had such a diverse array of cultures and generations living and working together, nor have we ever been more aware of the differences in “being” and “thinking”.

As much as we can appreciate the beauty of the bouquet, each flower remains distinct. Whether it’s a man or a woman; young or old; heterosexual or part of the diverse spectrum of the LGBTIQ+ community; right-wing or left-wing; Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or any other religious preference; from the North or South; black, white, or somewhere in between; extroverted or introverted – there is a label for everything, and each individual holds inherent value. But how do we ensure that every individual is also valued? How do we blend this combination of flowers harmoniously and make sure they emit a pleasant fragrance? How do we prevent one flower from absorbing all the water at the expense of the others’ flourishing?

Our society is rapidly transitioning from patriarchal to inclusive, and the same transformation is occurring within our organizations. Some leaders remain entrenched in the patriarchal model they grew up with, overlooking the importance of nurturing their team members. Others overcompensate by focusing excessively on individual sensitivities, forgetting that people also need a clear framework within which to operate.

In every organization, we encounter this challenge, and it’s becoming increasingly complex. The initial response to a problem often involves bringing in an expert. While subject matter experts are highly knowledgeable in their respective fields, they sometimes lack the holistic perspective required to navigate complex challenges and make decisions that align with the organization’s overall vision and values, or even the values of society.

Experts add value when contributing their expertise to the agenda, but can be problematic when they dominate it. In a world where public discourse is often steered by experts, it’s easy to forget the significance of simple, straightforward, effective leadership.

But what exactly is “good” leadership? And what does good look like for you?

We work with hundreds of organizations across various industries, providing support to leaders and leadership teams facing various challenges. Through these experiences, we have identified common themes that have allowed us to distill good leadership into different drivers and characteristics, which we have integrated into a model. This model enables everyone to be aware of these characteristics, assess themselves against them, and, most importantly, work on developing them to become better leaders. As a leader grows, so does their team and their organization.

At the core of our model are three key leadership tasks: inspiring, organizing, and enabling. These are typically linked to the three roles we see in leadership: inspiring is about being a leader, organizing is focused on the management aspect, and enabling is about your role as a coach.

These tasks are crucial at every level of leadership – self-leadership, team leadership, and organizational leadership – to achieve success.

The first task, inspiring, revolves around articulating a compelling vision and strategic plan, challenging the status quo, and leading by example. A good leader must be a skilled communicator, a storyteller who motivates others to pursue excellence and take ownership of their work.

The second one, organizing, involves creating clarity and structure, managing tasks and projects, and promoting collaboration and decisiveness within the organization. It provides the essential framework within which a leader must operate. Effective organization ensures that everyone is aligned and working toward shared goals, characteristics we mostly associate with a good manager.

The third task, enabling, focuses on mentoring, coaching, and creating an environment that brings out the best in people. Promoting diversity, inclusion, and a sense of belonging adds value to both individuals and the organization. A good leader enables their team members to grow and develop in their roles, fostering a culture of care and wellbeing. This leader acts as a coach.

Through these three tasks, we explore 21 leadership capabilities essential for your development as a leader. These capabilities are divided into three parts: self-leadership, team leadership, and how leadership resonates within the organization and its ecosystem. Each part contains several chapters that delve into specific capabilities, and provide practical advice and tools for you

to develop them. We've incorporated testimonials, case studies, and interviews with leaders we believe you'll find valuable. Seeing theory come to life is often much more inspirational, isn't it?

While reading this book is valuable, it's even more beneficial to actively work with it. That's why you will find a worksheet at the end of the book, encouraging you to reflect on its content and helping you create an action plan. If you need someone to bounce ideas off during your reflection, don't hesitate to reach out to us; we see ourselves as sherpas, guiding you to new heights.

Leadership is not rocket science, but it is multifaceted. You may not have the appetite to tackle all the capabilities at once and may prefer to digest them gradually. Therefore, you may find certain elements revisited in different parts to ensure you gain value from each chapter.

Furthermore, we don't claim to be experts, and these capabilities do not thrive in isolation; they are interconnected. Practical tips may appear more than once. It's up to you to create your own list of what works best for you.

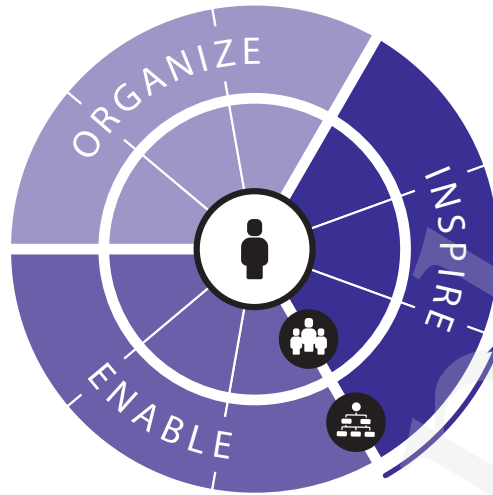
You may also notice that, at times, we present different perspectives. Within a team, we might serve similar goals, but in order to reach that goal your focus might differ depending on your role within the team. When an organization is going through a transformation, for example, there will always be a balancing act between managing the impact on people and delivering the expected financial results. The HR Manager is likely to emphasize the former, while the Finance Manager will prioritize the latter. Both of them are integral members of the leadership team, which highlights the value in combining these two perspectives. It's not a matter of right or wrong; they are simply complementary.

This kind of tension will pop up more than once in our book. Fighting polarization – or building bridges – with leadership doesn't mean looking for a compromise; it is first and foremost about trying to truly understand different viewpoints, and see where this leads. Is it destructive and polarizing? Or is it a positive friction or creative tension that will make us grow, individually as well as collectively? Let's aim for the latter.

And don't forget: leadership is a journey, and your starting point and context are personal. This means it is perfectly logical that your growth potential on some aspects will be higher than on others, and will differ from that of your colleagues and friends.

So whether you're an aspiring leader, a seasoned executive, or somewhere in between, this book will provide you with the guidance and insights needed to enhance your leadership skills and bring out the best in yourself and your organization. It should enable you to not only connect the dots but, more importantly, bridge the gaps in this polarized world, focusing on what unites us rather than what divides us and maximizing the collective potential without compromising on individuality.

We have visualized our leadership model to help you navigate through the book easily. In each chapter, you will know precisely which topic you are exploring. So, let's embark on our journey to improve leadership and collaboration! Enjoy the ride!



Self-leadership



- Actively builds self-knowledge & resilience, and manages own motivation & wellbeing
- Has emotional intelligence to work with feedback
- Knows importance of learning agility, keeps own curve steep

Team leadership



INSPIRE

- Articulates the vision & strategic plan in a compelling way
- Challenges the status quo, manages resistance, and takes a stand
- Leads by example



ORGANIZE

- Creates clarity & discipline
- Sets goals, roles & responsibilities
- Builds healthy high-performing teams



ENABLE

- Communicates with impact
- Develops others by installing a feedback culture
- Manages performance, and delivers above and beyond

Organizational leadership



INSPIRE

- Leads in a purposeful & value-driven way
- Owns & impacts the ecosystem
- Is contagiously courageous



ORGANIZE

- Promotes a learning culture
- Ensures swift collaboration within the organization
- Empowers ownership & decisiveness



ENABLE

- Encourages trust & psychological safety
- Stimulates a culture of care & wellbeing
- Is open-minded and drives diversity, inclusion & belonging

from Solvay/Syensqo's ILHAM KADRI

DREAM BIGGER THAN WHAT YOU CAN PROBABLY DELIVER,
WITH AMBITIONS THAT SCARE YOU

Leadership Unraveled

The heart of Casablanca, where the Atlantic breeze mingles with the scent of spices and the vibrant tapestry of Moroccan life, is where Ilham Kadri's journey began. This story, framed by her reflections shared in our conversation, paints a portrait of a leader whose ethos is as deeply influenced by her heritage as it is by her forward-looking vision. Her words, steeped in the experiences that shaped her, offer a vivid narrative of "the chemistry of leadership," leadership drivers that should resonate across all leadership levels: it is about embracing continuous learning and personal development, navigating barriers with empathy and understanding, championing sustainability through personal conviction, inspiring innovation and fostering a culture of inclusivity, combining vision with humility, and most importantly... dreaming big!

Today, Ilham is the CEO of Syensqo, a specialty materials spin-off from the 160-year-old company Solvay, but it all started with her grandmother.

Reflecting on her upbringing, she tells us: "I was raised by my grandmother in a humble yet loving home in beautiful Casablanca, Morocco. There is an old Moroccan saying that girls in Morocco have two exits in life: one that leads them to a good marriage and the other that leads them to the grave. My grandma pushed me to find my own third exit, one that takes you where you want to go. The door I chose was 'education.'" This poignant moment of prioritizing education over traditional paths sets the stage for a woman who chooses to seek her own path, a path of resilience and ambition that defies societal expectations, one that has become a cornerstone of her leadership philosophy.

At school and university she discovered her passion for science and technology, and through her career she became aware of the crucial role of science

at the service of humanity. This belief never left her, and became her very own purpose: “To contribute to human progress and improve society while addressing the sustainability challenges.” It became the engine that drives her day-to-day actions and commitments as a leader.

Learning and working on herself is a constant factor in Ilham’s life. That’s why she is surrounded by people who are always challenging the status quo. This is “the oxygen of progress,” as she calls it. Ilham sees it as her job to make sure the people around her have the space to be themselves and to challenge her and the entire team so everyone can grow.

For Ilham, a good and effective leader must show empathy, be able to create links, and invest in people. IQ might form the foundation, but she is more interested in EQ. Empathy helps one to make tough choices in times of trouble. But it also allows for a more inclusive leadership style that is fundamental to overcoming cultural and gender barriers, as she witnessed firsthand. One moment that will remain ingrained in her memory is a deal she struck in Saudi Arabia. Ilham explains: “One of my former employers had appointed me as the first female director in the Middle East and Africa at that time. Not the most women-friendly region in business. But I managed to establish myself as a real partner. With credibility, hard work, and determination, I became a sister to them, an indispensable bridge between East and West, which enabled me to make an impact and have the first seawater desalination plant built using reverse osmosis membranes. For the first time, not a droplet of oil was used, which made it cleaner and sustainable. This was historic in the Middle East.”

This chapter of her professional life not only showcases her resilience but also her ability to earn trust and respect in a challenging environment through empathy. Furthermore, it was an illustration of her commitment to sustainability.

This commitment to sustainability is deeply personal. Growing up in Morocco, she did not enjoy consistently running potable water or electricity. She even got a severe disease from drinking unsafe water. “Because we knew resources were limited, I simply learned that I did not have the luxury to waste, so I became greedy with natural resources and that’s how, for me, sustainability

started at home. It has been a huge part of my leadership journey – it inspired me to become a sustainable leader.”

Ilham believes that sustainability IS profitability, and companies that do not become sustainable simply will not survive. She sees it every day with her employees, who want to work for a purpose-led company, and with her customers: they need innovative and sustainable solutions in critical sectors, such as EV batteries, green hydrogen, thermoplastic composites, biobased solutions, and more.

Ilham is visibly proud of what they accomplished with the Solvay One Planet program – and with the continued work at Syensqo. “We’re on track to become carbon neutral by 2040, 65% of our sites are powered solely by renewable electricity (and 100% of our sites in the US and China...), we’ve increased our sustainable solutions to 60%, and 13% of our sales now contribute to the creation of a circular economy. Actions matter more than words and quick wins are important.”

This insight into her personal motivations underscores the importance of aligning leadership with core values.

“As a leader, it’s essential to be able to bring people together under a common purpose.” When Ilham became the CEO of Solvay, her mandate was to “unleash the potential” of the company and its employees. All employees were asked to share their past and future views of the company. It was Solvay’s largest ever listening exercise, which led to “we bond people, ideas, and elements to reinvent progress” becoming the purpose for a company that needed to reinvent itself after being around for centuries.

It was inspired by founder Ernest Solvay, who believed in pushing boundaries and making the impossible possible, something that really appeals to Ilham. Her approach to leadership is characterized by encouraging bold thinking but also – and even more so – by valuing diverse perspectives.

She wants to create an environment where people can bring their whole selves with all their differences to work in order to thrive. “It means breaking down emotional barriers and daring to be vulnerable, empathetic, imperfect, and authentic. Vulnerability is a strength, not a weakness. This mindset does not conflict with professionalism, performance, or success – quite the contrary.

For instance, when I switch on my computer in the morning, I am more than a businesswoman in a suit: I am still a mother. I was born and raised in Morocco. I have strong convictions. These things are all part of who I am at work and they play a strong role in my ability to lead. This is no different for the people around me.”

Don’t get her wrong. Ilham is aiming high. In her team she is looking for “moonshooters,” not “100 percenters” who only commit to doing things when they know exactly how to do them. “While the 100 percenters are still trying to figure it out, the moonshooters have just gone for it and already reached the moon,” she says.

Perhaps one of the most compelling aspects of Ilham’s leadership philosophy is her blend of ambition and humility. She candidly tells us: “I grew up believing that life isn’t about chance but about hard work, continuous learning, owning up to who you are, and about dreaming big, bigger than you think you can deliver, with ambitions that really scare you.”

Yet, she also acknowledges her own vulnerabilities: “Most of the time, I don’t know the answer. That’s where my team comes in: smarter people, younger people, a diversity of voices, sharing wisdom, perspectives, inspiring me on how to build and leave a legacy that can match their needs.”

No surprise the leaders she admires are those who achieve the “power of AND,” as she calls it. Leaders with the ability to build bridges and bring together seemingly opposite elements: to be sustainable AND profitable, to be daring in business AND be caring and put people first. Exactly what is at the heart of this book. And it is this balance between having a bold vision and recognizing one’s limitations that offers a powerful lesson in leading with both confidence and humility.

Ilham hopes her story about “the chemistry of leadership” encourages leaders at all levels to navigate their roles with a commitment to learning, empathy, sustainability, and inclusivity. By embodying these principles, leaders can not only achieve professional success but also inspire those around them to pursue a greater purpose, driving positive change in their organizations and beyond.

Leesexemplaar

PART 1

Self-leadership

Leesexamenjaar



You've just boarded an airplane with your family, all set to fly off on vacation. As usual, you pay only partial attention to the safety instructions, which you almost know by heart. However, there is always one part that continues to surprise you: "In case of a drop in cabin pressure, put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others."

As you glance at your children, the idea of prioritizing yourself feels wrong. Your instincts tell you to help them first... Do you recognize this feeling?

Well, this same instinct can surface when leading people or organizations. You feel responsible, and your focus is on the people around you and the business needs. Yet, the most critical need is what you see in the mirror: yourself.

To be of genuine help to others and to be an effective leader, you must put on your own oxygen mask first. Yet, how often do we continue assisting others with their oxygen masks while neglecting our own supply? Do we even have our own masks on? Soon, we become tired, unhealthy, less productive, easily irritated, and find ourselves in a downward spiral...

What if you metaphorically put on your oxygen mask first, not out of selfishness but because you can do more, both for others and yourself, when you prioritize your own needs? It may seem counterintuitive, but it's fundamental to being a good leader.

To grow an organization, you must grow your teams, and to grow your teams, you must first focus on your own growth.

In this first part of our book, we will explore three key capabilities of leadership that are essential for self-leadership. As a leader, your primary task is to empower others individually and collectively, but you can only do so effectively if you are in good shape and working to your strengths.

So, never forget to put on your own oxygen mask first. Deal?



Actively builds self-knowledge & resilience, and manages own motivation & wellbeing

“SUCCESS IS NOT FINAL, FAILURE IS NOT FATAL: IT IS THE COURAGE TO CONTINUE THAT COUNTS. A LEADER’S STRENGTH LIES NOT JUST IN THEIR VISION, BUT IN THEIR ABILITY TO KNOW THEMSELVES, RISE FROM ADVERSITY, AND SUSTAIN THE FIRE WITHIN. TO LEAD IS TO MASTER THE ART OF SELF-MOTIVATION AND NURTURE THE WELLBEING OF ONE’S OWN SPIRIT, FOR ONLY THEN CAN ONE INSPIRE AND GUIDE OTHERS TOWARDS GREATNESS.”

— Winston Churchill

“Your greatest strengths often come with corresponding weaknesses. The key is to be acutely aware of them and to capitalize on your strengths while remaining highly conscious of their potential downsides. The most successful leaders within our organization typically exhibit as many strengths as weaknesses in their assessments.”

A young marketer found himself in a pivotal moment during his development review with the company’s Chief Marketing Officer. He had recently been designated as one of the high-potential talents in his organization and had been evaluated across 11 competencies. His aim was to excel in all of them, yet he grappled with the realization that only six of these competencies were perceived as strengths. He excelled in clarity of purpose, objective analytical power, entrepreneurial drive, team leadership, self-confident integrity, and

team commitment. However, he struggled notably with adaptive influence skills.

The feedback he received emphasized that his strengths allowed him to deliver results with focus and speed. Nevertheless, it also highlighted that, on the journey to delivery, he sometimes overlooked the importance of remaining receptive to new insights and ensuring alignment with all stakeholders. This meant his influencing skills were limited to those with the same focus and speed; a greater sensitivity for people who were not on the same page yet would have led to a more adaptive approach and in turn a more significant impact.

Twenty-five years later, adaptive influence skills arguably remain his foremost area of development, but he has undergone significant growth. Getting older and wiser – and having hit the wall a few times – has helped him to increase his attention to make sure everybody is on board.

We must applaud the attention you give to your development areas; but what makes you unique as a leader are the strengths you continue to develop

Outstanding leaders are not solely born; they are forged. The foundation for becoming an exceptional leader resides within the individual. While the CMO played a pivotal role in acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of our young high-potential employee, true transformation occurred when our young leader internalized this feedback, took it to heart, and remained mindful of it throughout his career.

The magic didn't merely stem from his continuous efforts to address his weaknesses and set improvement goals. It was equally attributed to his awareness of his strengths and his adept exploitation of them. Two years after his initial assessment, he still received feedback suggesting that, while being committed and inspiring, "he should sometimes adapt his energetic style to the circumstances/individuals." His development areas will always remain his development areas. However, this was balanced by another comment stating that "he defends with conviction his ideas and views; he sticks to his point when he is convinced that he is acting in the interest of the business and defends his position even against higher management."

As much as he committed to improving his areas of concern, he also celebrated the recognition he received for his strengths.

We know this guy pretty well, because he is one of the authors of this book... And while we must applaud the attention he has given to his development areas, what makes him unique are his strengths, which he continued to develop.

So, just like this case, much of what you will read in this and the following chapters relates to a reality we have lived in, the learnings on the job, the walls we hit, the scars we have, the experiences with our customers or business connections.

We believe that these stories will resonate more than the pure theory, and hope they invite you to reflect on your own experiences, in order to help you improve your self-knowledge. At the end of this book you will find a worksheet to help you translate what you've read into possible actions for you. So please, while you are reading, take notes of things that strike you, make you think, or can help you grow.

Leadership is not a solitary journey; it's a collaborative effort

It takes courage to acknowledge areas for improvement, but this marks the first step toward becoming a better leader. While this chapter emphasizes self-leadership, it's imperative to remember that leadership is not a solitary journey; it's a collaborative effort. Identifying areas where you lack skills or competencies makes it easier to surround yourself with individuals who can complement your abilities, enabling collective strength.

If you struggle with self-assessment, ask those around you for their perspectives. Often a simple question is the quickest route to gaining insights. However you choose to proceed, seek feedback from others, including your colleagues and employees. You could formalize this by engaging with a personal coach, or you could establish a "personal advisory board" to assist you in your decision-making. Listen to their different viewpoints and ideas, using them to refine your leadership skills. And don't be concerned that an excessive focus on self-improvement might be perceived as counterproductive individualism; integrating your colleagues into your journey will mitigate such concerns, as they are sure to inform you when you stray off course.

Strong leadership often stems from the courage to acknowledge one's vulnerabilities

So, self-leadership starts with self-awareness. An adept leader recognizes their strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to identify areas for improvement. There is plenty of scientific evidence revealing that leaders who practice self-awareness are more adept at leading teams, communicating effectively, and making sound decisions. So, by acknowledging their shortcomings, they can work toward developing the necessary skills for more effective leadership.

Self-reflection and introspection are indispensable for cultivating self-knowledge. Regardless of how occupied you may be managing your team or organization, it's crucial to allocate time to consider your values, beliefs, experiences, strengths, weaknesses, and growth areas. As you evolve as a human being, so too will your leadership.

A close friend of ours held a prestigious, well-paid position at a major bank, yet he grappled with the bank's advertised inclusive image, which didn't align with the toxic boardroom reality. But he remained at the bank, and decided to play his role as best he could within the perceived boundaries. Then, his father passed away, prompting him to resign three weeks later. While there is no obvious correlation at first sight, the reality is that his father's death made him realize he had clung to his job for the wrong reasons, doing what was expected, paying too much attention to what his father would think, and ignoring what he thought was the right thing to do. Like many in his generation, he had been taught to value a good job, but he grappled internally with his values and beliefs. Only after losing his father did he muster the courage to make the decision to quit. Now he is running his own business doing what he truly enjoys: embracing human complexity, and using his thinking and his listening qualities to help people find their path. He quit his job, but got closer to his purpose and grew as a person...

Self-reflection is an important element for improving your self-awareness and therefore also for your growth. Most of us spend some time commuting to and from work, which is an ideal moment to reflect. But what should you reflect on exactly? It doesn't need to be anything spectacular. Start with the more obvious questions. What was your best leadership moment of the day or week? What did you like so much about it and how can you do more of it next week?

What kind of leader have you been, how do you think your team has perceived you? How did the feedback you received compare with how you see yourself? If you are ready to take it a level deeper, reflect on whether you gave everyone their fair share of your energy, or were certain meetings and experiences stealing your focus? Did you seek to understand other points of view before being understood? This way of untangling and sorting your observations creates meaning. Meaning which you can act upon going forward.

Besides mental reflection, keeping a journal to reflect on your experiences, successes, and failures can aid in processing emotions, extracting lessons, and aligning with your desired leadership path. Writing down thoughts and emotions makes them more tangible, fostering action. For example, one of our colleagues was struggling with public speaking, which is crucial for his role. He journaled about his fears and progress in this area. Over time, he noticed patterns that were blocking him, and implemented strategies to improve his confidence and skills in this area.

Manage your energy leaks

In addition to self-awareness, exceptional leaders display resilience. Resilient leaders embrace challenges as opportunities for learning and growth. They possess a sense of purpose and firm personal values guiding their decisions.

Resilience entails the ability to rebound after setbacks and failures. Leadership isn't without its challenges, but only some of them are within your control. Allocating energy wisely by focusing on matters within your control empowers you to make a meaningful difference.

An effective exercise for people who tend to think they need to fix everything (we all know a few of those...) involves listing actions and activities that are consuming your time and energy – both physical and mental. Organize these into three clusters. Cluster A encompasses issues where your efforts have no impact (for example: continuing to argue about the possibility of reaching your target while it is carved in stone by your board). Cluster B includes topics where you have influence, but the problem could resolve itself or be resolved by someone else (for example: you spend hours troubleshooting a critical system issue that should improve your customer's online experience, when a simple tweak of your customer service process fixed the problem). Finally, Cluster

C contains areas where your efforts have instigated meaningful change (for example: because of your analysis the organization was able to make some fundamental choices leading to revenue growth or a happier or more profitable customer).

Now, view these clusters from two perspectives: identify from which cluster you draw the most energy. This will probably be Cluster C. Then pinpoint your greatest sources of frustration. We guess this will be Cluster A. Now consider your boss's perspective as well. Where does your boss admire your contributions? This will likely be Cluster C. And where do you potentially irritate them? Yes, your greatest source of frustration, Cluster A...

How does that feel? Don't worry if it doesn't resonate, because this means you probably aren't struggling with any energy leaks. But if it does resonate, you could really benefit from this simple exercise.

Spending substantial time and energy on issues that frustrate you while causing irritation to others is indeed counterproductive, and realizing this could open up a world of possibilities in your agenda. There is one exception though; when an activity in Cluster A aligns with your values or authenticity, you might decide to still put a lot of time and effort into it, but then this is a deliberate choice. We refer to this as "managing your energy leaks."

Through this exercise, you not only free up valuable time and energy, which can be redirected to other endeavors, but you also heighten your awareness. This conscious approach enhances your ability to deliver and bolsters your resilience.

You either succeed or learn

Resilient leaders manage stress effectively, remain composed in the face of adversity, and adapt to change. This means you succeed in recognizing that when a situation is within your control, failure isn't a sign of weakness; it's an opportunity for learning and growth.

Some critics may argue that resilience is often used to shift blame onto individuals for their inability to cope with difficulties, rather than addressing external factors like organizational culture or systemic issues. However, these perspectives are not necessarily contradictory. Resilient leaders transform adversity into learning opportunities, which ultimately fortify them. Addressing