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# TRANSCENDENT LEADERSHIP

How to Lead Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime

Les McKeown

# How often have you read (or listened to) a leader complaining about the compromises, pressure and stresses that their leadership role places not just upon them, but on their family, friends and other relationships?

If you're a leader, maybe on occasion you've maybe even done it yourself.

That leadership comes at a cost is no surprise. These days, it's almost axiomatic that taking a leadership role in most organizations means accepting that reasonable hours, work-life balance and peace of mind are a thing of the past. Interview for the C-Suite, and part of the bargain is an implicit acceptance that whatever the pressures you've worked under until now, they're about to take a considerable step up in intensity.

And it's not just in business that this inverted relationship between leadership and stress exists. In politics, sports, the military, even in charitable good works, the more senior the individual, the more discretion and power they have—and yet, almost always, the less peace of mind.

It's no wonder that a recent poll by SHRM showed that over 75% of all employees don't want their boss's job.

But what if it didn't need to be this way? What if your leadership role just felt, well... right: demanding, yes, but fun too; challenging but controllable; intense but invigorating? What if with every step on the ladder of leadership you felt *more* comfortable, *more* "in the zone," *less* stressed, *less* pressured?

What if each successive leadership role brought out more of what makes you you, rather than asking you to compromise your core values, bury your deepest wishes, hold ransom your dreams?

Having coached and advised hundreds of leaders, I know this isn't a pipe dream. From frequent observation, I know that it's not only possible to be relaxed, fulfilled and energized by leadership, it is in fact precisely how the most consistently successful leaders operate.

Sure, the demands of corporate leadership are often very high, and that isn't likely to change anytime soon. But even in these stress-filled times, the leaders I work with who deliver high performance week in, week out (rather than in unpredictable fits and starts) do so from a state of 'flow': an ease with their role that gives them a calm yet intense focus — one which sets them apart from their highly stressed, over-pressured, out-of-balance colleagues.

## Leader, Know Thyself.

What sets these two categories of leader apart? What distinguishes the calm-yet-focused, balanced leader from the hyper-active, over-scheduled, less effective leader?

Superficially, it often appears to be a matter of underlying skills, with the calm, focused, consistently high-performing leader simply having more tools in their leadership toolkit than the intermittently successful, high-stress leader. And although (as we'll see) so-called "leadership skills" do have a place, on deeper inspection the root cause is much more foundational. With the calm, focused leader there is almost always a close match between their personal leadership style and the specific leadership role they are playing; while with the hyperactive, ineffective leader, there is most often than not a mismatch between the two.

Specifically, I've noticed over the years that all leaders exhibit one of three natural leadership styles—what I've come to term the "Visionary," "Operator" and "Processor" styles—and that the most common source of leadership stress occurs when there is a mismatch between an individual's personal style and the leadership role they're being asked to perform. For example: a Visionary leader who has been placed in an Operator role; or a Processor who finds themselves having to think (and lead) like a Visionary.

All other things being equal, it's more often than not this lack of congruence between what is being asked of the leader on the one hand (to be a Visionary, Operator or Processor), and their innate ability to act and think that way that causes stress and under-performance.

*“What if each successive leadership role brought out more of what makes you you, rather than asking you to compromise your core values, bury your deepest wishes, hold ransom your dreams?”*

Does this mean that all leaders are pigeon-holed as “V’s”, “O’s” or “P’s”, and destined only to perform one type of leadership role? Are we to be forever limited by some sort of leadership DNA that locks us into just one type of leadership position?

Not only is the answer a resounding no, observing those leaders who have transcended their “natural” leadership style uncovers the most fascinating and powerful characteristic of consistently high-performing leaders: a fourth, “learned” leadership style that anyone, Visionary, Operator or Processor, can tap into in order to lead in any situation and in any environment.

Let's first look in more detail at the three natural leadership styles that all leaders exhibit to some degree.

**THE VISIONARY** operates at 30,000 feet, is most comfortable working on long-term, strategic issues, embraces change and risk, and needs frequent exposure to both in order to feel satisfied and useful. They are often charismatic, are usually great communicators, and build a tight, loyal team around them.

Visionaries cycle between an active, and idle mode, alternating between bursts of creative energy and times when they kick back and recharge. They usually come back from the idle, recharge period with a multiplicity of ideas they've generated, all of which are prosecuted passionately. On the downside, the Visionary's ability to hyperlink between multiple subjects, coupled with their ability to hold seemingly contradictory viewpoints on the same subject, can confuse those who work with them.

Visionaries use their vision, flexibility, courage, and the ability to simplify complex ideas to motivate others to "ship"—get things out the door—but team members often find the Visionary's boredom with detail frustrating, as is their need to own all of the team's ideas and the extremes of commitment. They deliver best in those activities involving change and a minimum of routine.

They need variety, accountability and frequent check-ins to make sure they stay on track and aren't distracted by their own innate curiosity and boredom.

Working for a Visionary entails working long hours, mastering a broad grasp of detail and retaining a positive attitude. As a reward, Visionaries tend to over-delegate, entrusting even the most junior member of their team with tasks way above their pay grade, and are often scrupulously loyal and generous to hard-working team members.

Visionaries tend to be found in strategic rather than tactical positions in the organization, especially in those so-called right-brain activities such as R&D, marketing and planning. Many founder-owners are Visionaries.

**THE OPERATOR** works at the front line translating the Visionary leader's strategies into action, bulldozes their way past obstacles and is most fulfilled when overcoming problems by devising practical, even if improvised, solutions. They are uncomfortable with a vacuum, preferring clear direction, and despite being highly motivational often find it hard to delegate, instead depending on their team to act as self-starters.

Operators are intensely task-focused and will do whatever it takes to complete the job they have in hand—even if it means working outside the system and ignoring standardized procedures in order to do so. Because of this propensity to action rather than theory, Operators provide



an effective reality check for groups and teams, frequently eliminating unnecessary activities and identifying redundant or overly complicated systems and processes. On the other hand, they can at times seem to everyone else in the organization to be ruthless, roughshod and not as good team players.

Although they prefer clear delegated goals to vague or ambiguous directions, Operators work best when given broad latitude in how they do what they do. Attempting to micro-manage an Operator is ineffective and can cause intense frustration on both sides. Their impatience with delay, and their maverick approach to systems and processes often makes relationships with Operators defensive and issue-oriented. Conversely, providing clear direction and autonomy, being consistent in enforcing boundaries, and helping them with prioritization and delegation can produce an exceptional Operator-leader.

Working for an Operator can be frustrating, as they're rarely around and aren't good delegators. Almost the only way to develop a trusted relationship with them is to physically accompany them as they do their job—even better if you can find ways to run interference by smoothing out their often acrimonious or confrontational interactions with the rest of the organization.

Operators are usually found at leadership level in those parts of the organization where hard work, hyper-focus and improvisation are rewarded, such as the sales, production and service functions.

**THE PROCESSOR** thrives on systems and processes, delivering success and growth by iteration and constant improvement. Risk-averse and skeptical by nature, the Processor lives for data, eschews intuitive leaps of faith and bases decisions only on measurable, objective criteria. Not as naturally gregarious as the other two styles, the Processor will often build a tight team of like-minded individuals who together put in prodigious hours crunching data and running scenarios.

A Processor thinks logically, is compelled by data, not anecdote, and likes to bring order to the situations they find themselves in. They tend to be risk-averse and do not cope well with ambiguity or imprecision. Processor-leaders bring consistency, scalability, accuracy and an objective perspective, all of which they channel through the key metrics they use in controlling the enterprise.

Some Processors can over-analyze data to the extent that others find frustrating. Their resistance to both risk and change, their relatively steady pace of work (irrespective of the need for urgency), and the fact that they often respond to requests by saying no can make them a challenge to work with. Nonetheless, a highly effective relationship can be built with the Processor-leader by

respecting their need for order, listening to them with respect and attention, challenging them constructively, giving credit where due, and refraining from hyperbole and exaggeration (which they abhor).

Setting up a Processor-leader to succeed involves setting clear, precise goals, making sure they clearly understand the organization's overall commercial priorities (Processors can often lose sight of these in their intense focus on metrics), having patience and improvising sparingly.

Working for a Processor leader requires an understanding of the underlying pattern or rhythm to their work (in order to work within that pattern or rhythm, which Processors often expect their team members to do so) and similarly understanding their priorities (which aren't always obvious). Communicating surprises or bad news to a Processor is an art in itself, as they react badly to large deviations between planned and actual results. Most of all, working with a Processor leader requires the ability to innovate incrementally, not in giant leaps which, if proposed, will almost certainly be rejected as having too high a risk factor.

Processors tend to assume leadership positions in so-called left-brain functions in the organization such as administration, accounting, quality control and human resources.

**Finding Your Own Fit.** As we've seen, the foundational reason why some leaders are able to operate consistently in a calm and focused manner, while others cannot lies in the fit between their natural style and the leadership role they are asked to operate in.

Send a Visionary, for example, to open a new office in an emerging market, or ask them to head up the product development team and they will likely be in their element. Place them into a leadership role requiring close, constant attention to micro-detail (e.g. extracting detailed cost savings in an under-performing business, or heading up the audit department) and you have a recipe for immediate stress and imbalance.

Similarly, uprooting an Operator who is knocking it out of the park in the sales division, say, and placing them in a role where they are no longer able to engage in the front line every day (leading a kaizen, or heading up the admin function) will effectively destroy their ability to perform consistently at a high level.

Moving a highly effective Processor-leader to a position where they're being asked to make sweeping, intuitive decisions (leading the product development team, or mining new market opportunities) will immediately engender underlying stress caused by the mismatch between their natural style and the role they're being asked to play.

Of course, many such mismatches are avoided through an intuitive understanding on everyone's part that a mismatch is likely. There are many circumstances where a leader's natural style is so pronounced that it is patently obvious they shouldn't be dropped in to a position clearly unsuited to their leadership style, however it may be described or defined.

Unfortunately, as is too demonstrably the case, many leadership situations are less obvious: a leader's style may be more nuanced, or less understood by themselves and/or others, or the demands of the new role less clearly understood, leading to the sort of stress-inducing mismatch described above.

In this case, what is the round-peg V, O or P to do in the square hole in which they find themselves? Are they doomed to frustration and ineffectiveness, or a return to what they were doing previously? In fact, there is quite a lot that can be done, both in the short term and in the long term.

In the short term, fixing a leadership mismatch isn't difficult once you've seen the problem. If you're a Visionary, Operator or Processor in a leadership role unsuited to your natural style, take these (relatively) simple steps to get to a place where you can deliver calm/focused leadership:

**1 } Know your own leadership style.** Although until now I've discussed the Visionary, Operator and Processor as distinct and separate styles, the reality is that very few leaders are solely one or the other. Most leaders do have a single dominant style, but they also tend to have at least one additional, secondary style, which while not as natural as the first, they can call upon and utilize relatively stress-free for short to medium periods of time.

*“In the short term, fixing a leadership mismatch isn't difficult once you've seen the problem.”*

In order to achieve the optimum fit between your natural style and the leadership role you perform, it's exceedingly helpful to know your mix of V, O and P attributes. I've developed a simple, [free quiz](#) that can help.

**2 } Manage expectations upward.** As you become more aware of how you operate naturally as a leader, you can begin to (discreetly) make clear the type of role you prefer to operate in. Consider not taking a role you know will be a mismatch, and if it is within your gift, seek out roles you know will match your style(s).

**3 } Infill where you have to.** If you do find yourself in role that's a blatant mismatch with your natural leadership style, find a second in command who can help fill the gap. So if you're a Visionary and you've found yourself in a Processor role for example, make sure your #2 is a Processor who can bring the skills and mind-set necessary to compliment your own natural style. (This has the added benefit of enabling you to develop a successor who can take over your mismatched role, thus allowing you to move on to a position more suited to your style.)

**Transcending Your Natural Style.** In working with highly successful leaders, I've observed a relatively rare, but truly powerful phenomenon: those individuals, albeit a select few, who have learned to transcend their natural Visionary, Operator or Processor style, enabling them to lead effectively in almost any situation, irrespective of the demands of the role.

Such individuals, who I have come to refer to as Synergists, are hard to spot. It's much easier to identify leaders who succeeded—even on a grand scale—in situations where their V, O or P style was clearly the major contributing factor, and who failed when the needs of the leadership role shifted: for example, Winston Churchill, a classic “V/o” leader (big V, small O) who rose to true greatness in WWII but who despite almost unimaginable success was rejected by the populace in the austere post-war period in favor of Clement Attlee, a classic Processor-leader; or Paul Allen,

a “P/o” (big P, small O) when at Microsoft, who has spent many decades—and many billions of dollars—trying to replicate success as a Visionary, without success.

This type of leader—successful in their V, O or P role, unsuccessful outside of it—is easy to identify precisely because of the news-making nature of their failures. Less easy to spot are those leaders who have learned to shape-shift, leading effectively for long periods of time, through many different types of leadership position, but only because underneath the surface they have learned (apparently seamlessly) to transcend their natural style as the demands of leadership changed to become Synergists.

Synergist leaders include people like Jack Welch, who first came to prominence as “Neutron Jack,” a highly P-oriented leader (as most engineers are) who transformed over time to become a true Synergist—a leader who could call on any of the V, O or P styles as necessary. Or Steve Jobs, who was ousted from Apple (by John Sculley, an ex-PepsiCo Processor) precisely because he could only lead with one note—that of the Visionary—but who returned from his Next/Pixar phase as a Synergist, able to use his V-ness to incredible effect, but also working behind the scenes as an O or P when needed.

The most intriguing aspect of the Synergist role is the inverse relationship between its ease of adoption and its usage. Because it is a learned style, anyone can become a Synergistic leader.



And yet surprisingly few do. Most leaders remain trapped in their natural Visionary, Operator or Processor style with all of the limitations and scope for frustration and ineffectiveness that entails.

Why is that? Why do so many leaders fail to develop transcendent leadership skills and remain defined and proscribed by their natural style? I believe there are three reasons, each of them relatively simple but powerful in their ability to keep us stuck at the V, O or P level of leadership:

**1 } We're never shown the possibility.** Put simply, it is rarely pointed out to a leader that they have a natural style and that it is possible to transcend it. Instruments like 360 assessments may point to granular, behavioral adjustments that a leader might take to improve their leadership skills, but it is rare that a leader is confronted with a holistic picture of how they lead and challenged to move beyond it.

**2 } We like who we are.** There is absolutely nothing wrong with being a Visionary, Operator and Processor. As I've pointed out, these are natural styles that we all default to, and as a result, we enjoy being them. It's rare to meet a Visionary who yearns to be a Processor, for example—or vice versa. In fact, it takes only a short period of leading in our natural style before we begin to be defined by them. Our ego becomes intertwined with the very act of being a V, O or P. Once that process of ego-identification with our natural style takes root, it becomes difficult to envisage moving beyond our natural style to something else.

**3 } We don't know what the steps are.** Even when leaders do intuitively grasp the fact that they may be pre-conditioned to lead in a singular style, and see the need to move beyond that restriction—to develop transcendent leadership skills—what does that leader actually do? What are the steps involved in becoming a Synergist? Despite the plethora of books and courses on leadership, there has historically been no single resource a leader can reach for to overcome the restrictions of their personal style and become a transcendent leader.

**Becoming a Synergist.** Interestingly, the steps involved in becoming a Synergist, or a transcendent leader, are fairly straightforward. As you can see from the previous section, the main barrier to doing so is the issue of awareness—seeing that such a thing is possible. Once seen, the doing is relatively uncomplicated.

Here are the four main steps in becoming an effective Synergist (for more detailed information on each point, and resources to help with each, see my book, “The Synergist: Leading Your Team to Predictable Success”, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012):

**1 } Recognize and understand the three natural styles.** Learning to be a Synergist at heart means learning to understand, recognize and synergize the interaction between the three natural styles—essentially becoming the conductor of an orchestra of V's, O's and P's. Transcendent leadership is a version of what Ron Heifitz in his excellent book *Leadership on the Line* calls

“going to the balcony”—developing the skill of observing others working in their Visionary, Operator and Processor modes, and synergizing those interactions for optimum results.

The good news is that although this can be a lifetime’s study (I’ve been doing so for over 30 years) most people can intuitively understand the mindset of V’s O’s and P’s immediately once they are pointed out.

**2 } Adopt the Enterprise Commitment.** At the heart of Jack Welch’s and Steve Job’s transition to the Synergist role—and anyone who wishes do so—is an adoption of the Enterprise Commitment. I define this as follows: “When working in a team or group environment, I will place the interests of the enterprise above my personal interests.”

In other words, when working with a group or team the Synergist learns to consciously repress the need to scratch their Visionary, Operator or Processor itch, and instead to think, talk and act in the organization’s best interest. Whether that means a Visionary, for example, restraining their urge to swing for the fences and find a creative, high-risk answer to every problem, or a Processor resisting the urge to produce a 7-tabbed spreadsheet ahead of every discussion, adhering to the Enterprise Commitment means setting aside the siren call of the natural style when necessary.

In our examples above, Welch and Jobs did this subconsciously and intuitively. By adopting the Enterprise Commitment formally, you can substantially accelerate your transition to becoming a Synergist.

**3 } Develop a switching mechanism.** Of course adopting the Enterprise Commitment doesn't mean eradicating or permanently subjugating your natural style. Both you and the organization require that you operate naturally as a V, O or P in much of your day-to-day functional activities. Learning to be a Synergist doesn't supplant your natural style. Instead, it becomes an additional mode you can utilize as and when necessary while retaining all your natural V-, O- and P-ness.

*“By adopting the Enterprise Commitment formally, you can substantially accelerate your transition to becoming a Synergist.”*

But after perhaps years of operating in V, O, or P mode, it can be difficult to break old habits when you first start to learn the Synergist style. A hot-button topic, an unfortunate use of terminology, a rolling of the eyes, almost anything can cause default V-O-P synapses to trigger and override the Enterprise Commitment.

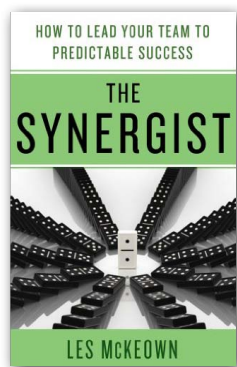
For that reason, it's useful to start by taking whatever literal, physical steps are necessary to keep the Enterprise Commitment before you at appropriate times, and to do so for long enough that it becomes second nature. Here are a few suggestions. find one that works for you:

- Print the Enterprise Commitment on a card and set it in front of you in every meeting.
- Read it out loud at the start of meetings.
- Write it out by hand at the top of each new page of notes you take.
- Set an automatic reminder on your cell phone, tablet, or laptop to pop up a discreet text reminder every 15 minutes during meetings.

**4 } Coach others.** The more people on any team who know how to switch into Synergist mode, the more effective that team will be, and the less gridlocked it will be by competing Visionary, Operator and Processor wants and desires. Don't stop at developing the Synergist style for yourself. Introduce others on your team to the V-O-P terminology and encourage them to see the benefit in learning and using the Synergist style particularly in group or team interactions.

**The more people in your organization that know and understand the Synergist style, the more effective and efficient your organization will be. 📌**

# Info



**BUY THE BOOK** | Get more details or buy a copy of [The Synergist: How to Lead Your Team to Predictable Success](#).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Les McKeown is a serial founder/owner, sought-after advisor, bestselling author, and in-demand speaker. An internationally known strategist, Les McKeown advises C-level teams at Fortune 500 companies on high-performance organizational development. Les McKeown is currently the President and CEO of Predictable Success. In this role, he advises CEOs and senior leaders of organizations on how to achieve scalable, sustainable growth and speaks to Fortune 500 companies about his breakthrough strategies.

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