

Why We Need Leaders

A provocation on the theory of leadership

Most leadership development asks you to study models — situational, transformational, servant. These are useful tools. But they skip the more unsettling question:

What is it about us — as human beings — that makes leadership necessary in the first place?

This is a question about human nature, not management technique. And sitting with it honestly is more productive than any competency framework.

1. Leadership as a response to anxiety

Start with the most honest observation: leadership is not primarily about direction or vision. It is a response to anxiety.

Human beings are uniquely aware of their own vulnerability — we know we are finite, that the future is uncertain, and that individual cognition has real limits. We cannot hold that awareness indefinitely without some cost. Research in existential psychology suggests that much of how we organise ourselves socially — including the way we relate to people in authority — functions as a buffer against that discomfort.

In this reading, leaders are meaning-makers before they are strategy-makers. When the environment feels threatening or ambiguous, we do not simply want someone to tell us what to do. We want someone to make the world feel coherent and manageable again.

Pay attention to the moments when teams look to leaders — not for information, but for reassurance that things make sense. That is this dynamic in action.

2. The evolutionary case

We are a social species. Human survival across evolutionary time was entirely contingent on coordinated group action — hunting, building, defending, planning. Leaderless groups in conditions of threat are neurobiologically intolerable: the brain reads the absence of coordinating authority as danger itself.

Leadership is not a cultural invention layered on top of rational individuals. It is a biological necessity embedded in the architecture of how we function together. We do not choose to need it, any more than we choose to need attachment or belonging.

We are wired for followership. The question is not whether we will follow — it is what we follow, and why.

Leadership development that ignores this produces people who are fluent in leadership language but blind to the emotional and social forces actually driving behaviour — including their own.

3. What groups do with leaders

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion observed something important about groups that most leadership programmes prefer to ignore: groups do not primarily function in rational, task-focused ways. They cycle between modes of collective behaviour driven by unconscious assumptions rather than deliberate choice.

In one mode, a group positions a leader to carry everything the collective cannot manage — ambiguity, anxiety, hope, rage. The leader becomes a container for the group's projections, whether they want that role or not.

This explains something observable in almost every organisation: the most competent people are not always the ones followed most intensely. Followership is partly emotional. We bring to leaders what

we once brought — or wished we could bring — to the important figures in our early lives. Authority figures activate old patterns. This is not pathology. It is how humans are built.

If you are in or moving into a leadership role, you are not just executing strategy. You have become, in part, a psychological object for the people around you. Understanding that — without being destabilised by it — is one of the more demanding things leadership requires.

4. The burden of freedom

Erich Fromm, writing in the shadow of fascism in the 1940s, offered a troubling insight that remains largely unacknowledged in leadership thinking: genuine autonomy is frightening.

Freedom requires that we author our own meaning, tolerate uncertainty, and bear the weight of self-direction. Most people — most of the time — cannot sustain that indefinitely. The appeal of surrendering to a leader, an ideology, or an institution is the relief it offers from the burden of deciding for yourself.

This is not weakness. It is a very human cost-benefit calculation — and it is operating in your organisation right now.

Leadership thinking that assumes people simply want more autonomy is optimistic to the point of naïvety. The more honest question is: what does it take to help people tolerate freedom enough to actually use it?

5. Leadership as a relational field

The most important reframe may be this: leadership is not a property of a person. It is a relational field that the leader and the led co-construct together.

The follower constitutes the leader as surely as the leader shapes the follower. You cannot understand leadership by studying only the person at the front. You have to look at the relationship — and at what that relationship is doing for everyone involved.

This means the question “*what kind of leader should I be?*” is, in the end, the wrong question. The more productive question is:

What kind of relational field am I participating in — and what is my function within it?

Leaders and followers need each other. Not sentimentally, but structurally. Each makes the other intelligible.

A frame to carry forward

If you distil the above into a single working theory, it might sound like this:

Leadership exists not because organisations need someone to be in charge, but because human beings — individually and collectively — generate anxiety and complexity faster than they can process it. Leadership is the socially authorised function of metabolising what the system cannot digest on its own.

This shifts the question from *what do leaders do?* to *what does leadership make possible that would otherwise be intolerable?*

That, I’d argue, is the question worth sitting with.

Three to leave you with:

- When you think of the leaders you have been most drawn to — what were you actually looking for from them?

- What is the difference between a leader who absorbs the group's anxiety and one who metabolises it? Which have you experienced?
- What would it mean to take up a leadership role knowing you will become a psychological object for others — and what would that require of you?