

# CAMINO

LEADERSHIP NOTES ON THE ROAD

LEANDRO HERRERO

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Designed by Rachel Barker

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# BASE CAMP

**Philosopher Martin Heidegger requested before his death that the collection of his writings be called ‘paths, not works’. He had used the word ‘paths’ several times. It provides, according to some interpreters of his ‘works’, an image of ‘leading’ but not necessarily to anywhere in particular; like many paths do in the woods.**

The great Spanish poet Antonio Machado said it well in one of his most acclaimed poems. It would read in English something like this: ‘Walker, there is no path, you make the path by walking’.

The allegory of the path, whether Machado’s path making or Heidegger’s ‘paths, not works’, is a good metaphor for leadership. I really believe that cartography and leadership are twin sisters.

Pilgrimage is also another good metaphor for the leadership journey, a journey that can be done in solitude but also accompanied by followers. The pilgrimage has both the personal and the collective, all in one. The journey contains all sorts of challenges and discoveries for the pilgrim, as it does for the leader. The difference in the pilgrimage is that it has a fixed destination. But arriving is never landing by helicopter. You have to walk, to go, to move, bit by bit, and then sense, learn, live.

Every year, about 300,000 people walk the Camino de Santiago (The Way of St James) a network of routes starting in France or Portugal, or Spain itself, and that ends in Santiago de Compostela, in Galicia, Spain. Probably a minority will walk the ‘required’ last 100 km on pure religious grounds. But most will talk later about the transformative effects of the Camino, the route, the pilgrimage.

Constantine P. Cavafy is one of my favourite poets, and *Ithaca* my favourite one. He describes the perils of the journey to the mythical Ithaca. A destination. ‘Keep Ithaca always in your mind. Arriving there is what you’re destined for’. But he says that most of those perils may be in your head. And then he recommends to take your time, not to rush, go slowly, stop in all the ports, learn from the locals, and buy their perfumes. And he warns, maybe when you finally get to Ithaca, you’ll be disappointed. It has nothing to offer compared with all you’ve learnt and lived and changed. ‘Wise as you will have become, so full of experience, you will have understood by then what these Ithacas mean’.

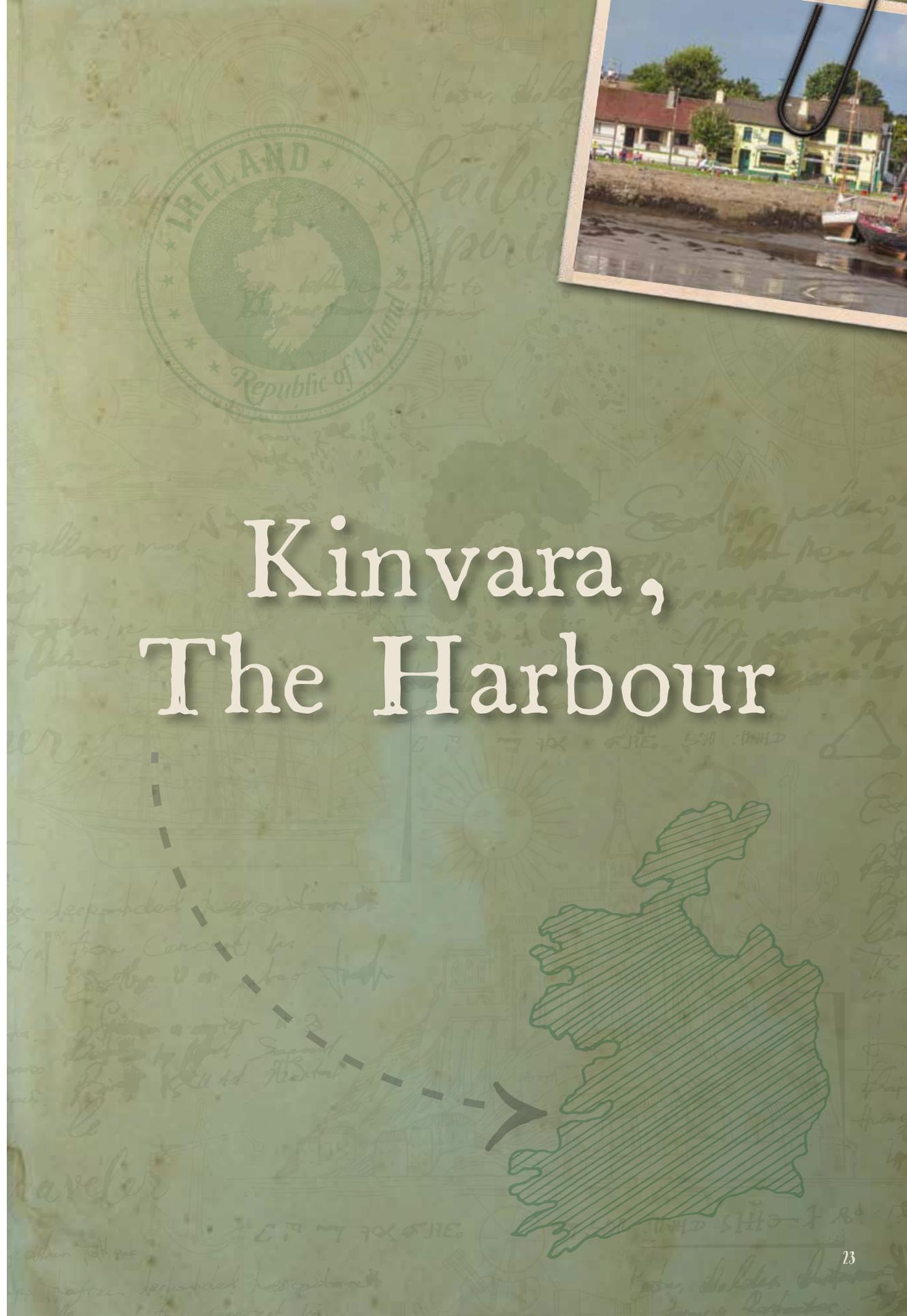
Good leaders are good path makers. Sometimes the journey is not clear. The destination may still be ambiguous. Again, it’s all about cartography. For me, a leader is the cartographer in chief who, whilst walking with others, also becomes an architect and a builder. If this is about journeys, and maps, and building, and Cavafy’s ‘enter (ing) harbours you’re seeing for the first time and stopping at Phoenician trading stations, to buy fine things’, then there is almost no end to it.

On my imaginary journey inside my head, I took notes and articulated ideas. Most became a Daily Thought, a blog I have been running for years. This is a collection of those notes. Don’t look for Harvard here, there are only harbours and other places that have generously adopted the content between them.

In this Camino of mine, I have also learnt to spot the real things, the fundamentals, the rocks. These are my Rules. A small collection of warnings, strong views and discoveries that I do not intend to be transferable. After all, the journey is not transferable, nobody can walk the Camino for you. Liberated by the idea that I don’t need to impart universal wisdom to end in a sterile case study and that I can share these rules like one shares a meal without having to explain the chemistry of the ingredients, here they are, still full of dust from my journey. The one I have only just begun.

1. Earn credibility all the time. Stocks deplete easily.
2. Act as if you do not have anything to lose.
3. Be unreasonable in your demands, the reasonable ones are taken.
4. Detect bullshit and become proficient at detecting it. Then, protect yourself and others.
5. Exercise provocation with panache and respect. Aim at being appreciated, not hated, for it.
6. Don’t be a provocateur, rebel, maverick, contrarian or challenger for the sake of it. Have a good ‘because’ ready.
7. Infect others, don’t do it alone.
8. Be restless, be uncomfortable (and foolish and hungry and the rest...). They’re the only things that confirm that you are alive.
9. Watch your ego. Most of the time it is not your friend. Rule of thumb, most of the time it’s not about you.
10. Never settle for one possibility only.
11. Don’t waste your time managing the ‘inevitable’. There is a lot of ‘possible’ waiting for a leader. Look for what would not happen without you.
12. Seek unpredictable answers. The predictable ones are already seeking you.
13. Don’t be against anything. Don’t create enemies. The exceptions are mediocrity and dishonesty.
14. Write down your little bit of daily legacy in a secret little book.
15. There is only one test: what will you tell the children? (that you do, you did, you didn’t do).
16. More important than what you say is what people hear when you are saying it.
17. Practice ‘I don’t know’, possibly followed by ‘and I don’t think you know either, so let’s figure it out’.
18. Make things happen first, then clean up the process for the next time. In that order.
19. The unexamined leadership, like the unexamined life, is not worth living.
20. Play as many roles as you want, but never a victim or an enemy. Both being ‘victim’ or ‘enemy’, requires your full consent.

**Off to the next harbour.**



# Kinvara, The Harbour

# Leadership vs hearing problems

**'AND THOSE WHO WERE SEEN DANCING WERE THOUGHT TO BE INSANE BY THOSE WHO COULD NOT HEAR THE MUSIC'.**

Friedrich Nietzsche's quote is a great reminder. The advanced mind, the individual a bit ahead of the game, the team challenging the default position, the company pushing for the unconventional, they are all singing something that perhaps others cannot hear. Or cannot hear yet.

In the famous 1997 Apple ad *Think Different*, a list of people are quoted: 'the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers (...) the ones who see things differently'. I agree that we need these minds, but we also need a company environment that can host these rebels. Above all, we need leaders that can hear.

I have written a few times about my misgivings about 'the rebels for the sake of it', or the promotion of the 'rebel' category as a major player in 'change management'. This is all very well, but I am more interested in the creation of environments where the ones who can dance can actually dance, and where leaders are not deaf and can actually hear different music.

Every time you or your team are about to declare some idea or initiative as 'insane', double check your hearing. Perhaps you can't hear that music. The problem may be you, not those dancing.

**'AND THOSE WHO WERE SEEN DANCING WERE THOUGHT TO BE INSANE BY THOSE WHO COULD NOT HEAR THE MUSIC'. A GREAT QUOTE BY NIETZSCHE, WHICH NIETZSCHE ACTUALLY NEVER SAID. IT HAS BEEN QUOTED A MILLION TIMES. WE HAVE HEARD HIM SAYING IT. BUT HE NEVER DID. YOU SEE, STILL HEARING PROBLEMS.**

# 5 things very successful leaders have in common

1. They don't read blogs entitled '*5 things very successful leaders have in common*'.
2. They don't care about lists of platitudes such as: be yourself, know where you are going, give feedback, be proactive, listen to people and don't leave things for tomorrow.
3. They don't think they have anything in common with other successful leaders other than success.
4. Actually, very successful leaders have in common a pair of legs, a pair of eyes, one heart, they were all babies before, and they will all die.
5. Courage, determination, resilience, honesty and fantastic communication skills. These 5 attributes of very successful leaders are equally found in very unsuccessful leaders.

## **I BEG YOU:**

Stop thinking like a printout. Stop spamming with a list of platitudes. Say something that is better than silence. Stop writing as if you have found the Meaning of the Universe. Starting the phrase with "research shows that" does not necessarily give credibility to your argument.

By all means, share ideas, personal and subjective. That is not the problem. On the contrary, that may be the solution to Robotic Psychological Pollution. I love biased and subjective ideas associated to a name. Then I know I am talking to a human being. I may agree or not, but I will know where people stand.

Disclosure. There are no 5 things that very successful leaders have in common. Or 10 things. Or Harvard research with the solution. These attributional lists have the solidity of a cream cake. Father Christmas is your dad. Management thinking is exhausted. We can't milk more Google lists anymore.

**RICHARD III UPDATE: 'A HUMAN AND CRITICAL THINKING CONVERSATION, MY KINGDOM FOR A HUMAN AND CRITICAL THINKING CONVERSATION'. IT'S THE BATTLE FOR IDEAS, NOT LISTS.**

# To be a better leader, take a holiday from yourself

THE SPACE OF YOUR SELF IS OCCUPIED. BY YOU. THIS IS GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS. ON ONE HAND, YOU ARE ALWAYS WITH YOUR SELF. ON THE OTHER HAND, YOU MAY BE TOO MUCH WITH YOUR SELF. THE SELF CAN BE YOUR WORST ENEMY ('WE ARE OUR OWN WORST ENEMIES') BUT COULD ALSO BE YOUR BEST FRIEND. BEST FRIENDS OCCASIONALLY IRRITATE YOU, PRECISELY BECAUSE OF THEIR CLOSENESS, THEIR PROXIMITY. PERHAPS YOU HAVE WISHED, A FEW TIMES, TO TAKE A LITTLE BREAK FROM A 'BEST FRIEND'.

Leaders need to be good friends with themselves. They need to have the insight and the maturity to see their Self in action: taking too much space? Too little space?

There are times when you should take a holiday from 'yourself', as the late John O'Donohue would say. It does not have to be a long, exotic holiday, but more of a time out or a break.

THERE ARE FIVE SETS OF SYMPTOMS WHICH MAY SUGGEST THAT YOU SHOULD CONSIDER THAT HOLIDAY (SOON):

1. You find you're talking too much about yourself
2. For a little while you have been too harsh, perhaps too unkind, to yourself, blaming yourself for an unusual number of things
3. You are missing some life-lines (not dead-lines) such as kids birthdays, anniversaries, reunions. People seem to have the habit of having birthdays and anniversaries the days you are travelling or absent
4. You find yourself interfering too much in other people's lives, professional or personal
5. You have not had a chance recently to ask yourself that question about 'what your legacy as a leader is?', 'what kind of house are you building?', 'what are you leaving behind?'

There may be more symptoms, but these are pretty important. Trust me, I am a doctor.

Sure, to identify the symptoms some insight capacity is required. Which I am assuming a leader has. If not, the case is terminal, anyway.

YOU MAY NOT HAVE THESE FLAGGED IN A TRADITIONAL 'LEADERSHIP MANUAL'. THIS IS PART OF THE 'NOT-OFF-THE-SHELF-LEADERSHIP-STUFF' SERIES.

# Choosing between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility

**'EARLY IN LIFE I HAD TO CHOOSE BETWEEN HONEST ARROGANCE AND HYPOCRITICAL HUMILITY. I CHOSE THE FORMER AND HAVE SEEN NO REASON TO CHANGE'.**

This is a quote by Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), pioneering architect, critical and conceptual thinker of spaces and places, father of a movement and a style, a great mind and an often controversial figure.

This is a great quote. A great frame for leaders. There are always choices, big choices and small choices, mundane choices and existential choices.

I respect them all.

But I recognise my choice in the honest arrogant side: as a consulting company we operate with fixed 'honestly arrogant' principles. For example, we don't sell our time. Yep! It is

simply something we don't sell.

We sell advice, outcomes, help, value, hands on implementation, motivation, engagement, ideas, critical thinking, dreams, realities.

We are organizational architects.

We sell organizational houses, not the time that it takes to build them.

Our 'honest arrogance' drives Procurement Departments nuts, delights great customers and puzzles others. How easy it is to default to hypocritical humility.

Oh, I forgot, we also sell restlessness, sometimes comfort.

I will draw a parallel with leadership, the really interesting topic, not me. Leadership needs authenticity, clarity of the value it brings, unapologetic stances, its own 'honest arrogance'. Respect for others, driving others to better pathways, mobilizing energies and, in general, 'taking others with you', start from a position of authenticity. This is often seen as arrogant or superior. How sad that 'hypocritical humility' is far more politically correct and far more accepted.

I've seen (I meet every day) weak leaders, middle of the road CEOs, unauthentic leaders, dishonest arrogant ones, and anything in between. But I also see great leaders and great minds. From the latter, all of them have in common the right imbalance between that honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. As for the best I know (whether clients, friends, not clients, not friends) it is crystal clear what they stand for. Whether I like it or not.

Even my favourite ones, the ones who don't profess to have all the answers, the ones who don't have a

fixed destination, the ones who are more Travellers and Cartographers than anything else, do all these things from a position of strength. Their humility is a strength, not hypocritical. Their honesty may come across as arrogance. But most of them are the most anti-arrogant people I have ever met. In a world of often weak principles, strong ones may come across as self-important, too proud or superior.

Most historical religious, political or civic leaders, did not say, 'have black, or perhaps pink, it does not really matter, red is good as well, but if you like green, so be it; it's all the same, it's all relative, don't worry about it; it all depends on circumstances'. Nope. It does not.

**MY COLLEAGUE AND BUSINESS PARTNER CAROLINE TIERNEY, BRINGS THE LLOYD WRIGHT QUOTE TO THE TABLE MANY TIMES: 'ARE WE BUILDING A LLOYD WRIGHT HOUSE OR A DRIVE-THROUGH MCDONALDS?' THE HORROR OF THE WRONG CHOICE KEEPS US ON TRACK.**

# Leadership is a social concept, not an individual trait

But we are fascinated by the individual stock

Leadership is a term that describes a relationship. No relationship, no leadership. Leadership can only be defined in terms of followers. No followers, no leadership. Cut across this apparent platitude for a minute and suspend judgement.

The early centuries' desert hermits were not great leaders at the time. Then, some of their writings were diffused over centuries. Some are considered thought leaders today, even if they never had troops around. Can a hermit be a leader? If he has followers, yes he can. What would describe them as leaders is not a sort of intrinsic set of characteristics (wisdom, humility, vision) but the existence of a relationship which entails people following them.

Harrison White, (*Identity and Control*, 1992, 2008) one of the greatest living sociologists, has been very clear about what he considers the error of attributing traits to 'leadership', despite the thousands of books that do so. These are not universal here. It's not something that you have. It's what you practice and the how.

For every set of attributes associated to a good leader (or a good company, or successful organization for that matter) one has to see if some or all of those attributes are also found in not particularly good leaders (or unsuccessful organizations).

We know more about the liabilities of not having something than the benefits of having it. Translation: we know that a leader that is not honest, that has little integrity, that treats people like commodities and has an ego bigger than the Sun, is bad news. He will have that negative influence, will run the organization in a particular way, will be a disaster.

Now, let's have the opposite. A leader that is very honest, has tremendous integrity, treats people with high respect, is humble and a servant, is surely a gem to have. Do the combination of all these make him a good leader? No, sorry. It makes him a great human being. Those 'good attributes' are not exclusive of that category/concept called 'leadership'. But it's great to have this around.

A great deal of so-called research, which in pop-business-culture is often translated into those 10 habits, 10 characteristics, 10 things, 10 attributes, is flawed. That does not make it 'not interesting' and, for sure, it does not seem a handicap to write a book about it.

**LEADERSHIP IS NOT SOMETHING THAT ONE HAS OR NOT, IT IS SOMETHING THAT ONE PRACTICES IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THAT TRANSLATES INTO PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOURS AND RELATIONSHIPS. OUR 'INDIVIDUAL INTEREST' IS OUT OF FOCUS.**

# Your most important list of personal assets. Take time. Now?

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO LIST OUR OWN ASSETS. AND THAT IS SOMETHING THAT IS VERY HEALTHY TO DO. PRACTICE IT FROM TIME TO TIME, NOT JUST WHEN TALKING TO RECRUITERS.

- 1. WHAT WE'VE DONE.** This is the first thing that comes to mind. Many CV/resumes are travel books, with a bit of TripAdvisor. This list will give you the 'been there, done that'. It may look impressive or may not. But it's not the most important list, even if you have the heroic assignments in the Amazon (the forest and the online).
- 2. WHAT WE KNOW.** Ah! This is the bit that usually deals with qualifications and 'experience'. Experts, experts! Can you really list what you know and don't know? OK, but this is not the most important list anyway.
- 3. WHAT WE CARE ABOUT.** That's another list. Try it. Seriously. (Now?!) Hard sometimes. It's the list of values. But don't call it values, it's a bit devalued. Call it '*The Things I Seriously Care About List*'. This is a very, very important list, but not the most important list.
- 4. WHAT WE DO AND LIKE, THAT NOT EVERYBODY KNOWS, PROBABLY NOT IN THE COMPANY ANYWAY.** Training kids, singing in

a choir, driving old ladies to the doctor, making mojitos. Very important list, but not the most important list.

- 5. THE THAT'S ME LIST IN FRONT OF A MIRROR.** What is unique about you, from all the lists above, that defines you, when you look at yourself in the mirror and say, Ah! I know that guy. This is the you as 'the only world expert of your own experience' (William Stafford). This is the unique blend of good and bad, and less good, and those unique pieces of the other lists. This is the most important list.

Can you make that list? Just as well, because whilst somebody else can list the things that you have done, the marvellous things you are an expert of, your values and your secret likes, nobody else other than you can write list number 5.

It's also a choice to define yourself by (1) what you do, (2) what you know, (3) what you like and are good at, (4) what you care about, or (5) what is it only you and nobody else knows about.

PS. Note that the default position in introducing people is to talk about what we do. Nice to meet you Peter, nice to meet you John, so, what do you do? Well, I run the IT back office for Super Duper. And you?

Now, imagine this: Nice to meet you Peter, nice to meet you John, so, what do you care about? Well, these are the things: kids, fishing, and global warming, no particular order. Awkward? But why? It's a perfectly legitimate question.

I am digressing. Make that list 5.

# The many 'me' inside Me need some discovery: have a go

They all seem to come for dinner

Continuing the conversation on leadership. Yes, we could go on forever. Let me make an assumption: that miraculously you'll have some quieter time soon to slow down a tiny bit. Summer: that magic word that means lots and lots of days for many of my clients and just a little break if you are in the US. Apologies to those who don't have summer when we do have one. I know that you down South take revenge and have a warm Christmas.

If you have some extra time for reflection, of some sort, well, (your) leadership is not a bad topic to focus on. Read, think, take notes?

If you start deep inside you here is an idea: list your contradictions. Yep. How you like A but also B, which is so opposite. How you criticise X and love Y, but you are X as well, and you don't criticise yourself. Greet the many *yous* that live together.

Frankly, in my case, sometimes it looks like a 70's commune of uninvited people taking over the living room and camping in the garden. There are so many *mes*.

I really believe that perhaps step one for any reflective leadership is to acknowledge the contradictions inside, welcome the paradoxes and do some discovery work.

And then, remain calm.

**ELIAS CANETTI (1905-1994)  
WINNER OF THE NOBEL  
PRIZE IN LITERATURE SAID:  
'I WOULD LIKE TO REMAIN  
SIMPLE, SO AS NOT TO  
CONFUSE THE MANY IDENTITIES  
I AM COMPOSED OF'.**

**PRECISELY. I SAY CALM  
INSTEAD OF SIMPLE. MAYBE  
BOTH ARE THE SAME.**

# Heaven is empty of self-centred people

These were recent words of Pope Francis to the Italian bishops, apparently too preoccupied with their own careers and favours in the Vatican.

These are also words of wisdom for leadership. Leadership and self-centred attitudes do not go well together. Self-centred leaders are bad leaders, dangerous leaders. Leadership requires a servant attitude and this is incompatible with a self-centred focus. In fact, a refocusing of 'the centre' may even be a requisite for success.

There was a moment in the 2008 Obama campaign when the grassroots movement began to be organized. Almost in passing,

David Plouffe, the then manager of the campaign, wrote in his later book, *The Audacity to Win: The Inside Story and Lessons of Barack Obama's Historic Victory*, that the message to the grassroots was: 'It's not about him, it's about you!'. Obama was very good at refocusing attention from himself to the issues and to the activists.

Self-centred leadership is an oxymoron, a dangerous one. The good news is that these pseudo-leaders are very visible at a distance. My advice: avoid them like the plague, because whatever they pretend to lead, the focus is most likely on them and not on the real issues of concern.

# There are good leaders, excellent leaders, and Gold leaders

This is what Gold looks like

**GOLD LEADERSHIP IS THE ONE ABOVE SILVER AND BRONZE, THAT'S IT. SORRY IF YOU WERE EXPECTING A VERY SOPHISTICATED DEFINITION.**

If I describe the Gold, you can figure out what Silver and Bronze would be. Certainly, a very rich set as well, all excellent. Just not Gold.

## **THIS IS GOLD:**

1. Ahead of the game, a few or more steps than anybody else. A bad leader thinks that this Gold leader is on a different planet. But the Gold leader is not; he/she simply sees this planet from a different angle. An angle that not many people see. This is visioning at its best, not dreaming. He/she is also not entirely apologetic about this.
2. Imagination at work, which needs some (often irritating sounding) detachment from daily life; even if that daily life sucks the Gold leader into factual problem solving. Even a crisis that is in the process of being addressed, by no means solved, elicits in the Gold leader the thinking of how to avoid a new one, or different one, which annoys people trying to solve the crisis of the day.
3. The Gold leader refuses to obey the 'one thing at a time' rule. For the Gold leader, sequential stuff is overrated.
4. The Gold leader refuses to see 'focus' as something you see through a tiny hole. Focus is often confused with determination. The Gold leader is focused but has more than one target to focus on. He or she particularly likes

people who can have a broad vision and a good helicopter view, and then can focus. Which confuses some.

5. The Gold leader thinks legacy, even when nobody expects that he or she thinks legacy, not yet. It's mainly not personal or ego legacy but thinking about the building that is being built. Sometimes nobody seems to see the walls. Gold leaders do.
6. Creates space and time by stealing them, by refusing to be drawn to busyness. This is both for himself/herself and for others. It has nothing to do with 'free time' and 'thinking time'. It has to do with the War on Stupid Busyness.
7. The Gold leader is brilliant at enhancing the possibilities and life of people. He/she puts people in the right places, which also stretches them. There is nothing altruistic or naive in this. He or she has perhaps an innate hope in human beings but may not be too vocal about it.
8. The Gold leader refuses to play the role of having all the answers or knowing the exact point of destination, but at the same time brings others to figure out the journey (and may close the door and throw the key out of the window until everybody is on the same path).
9. The Gold leader not only accepts but promotes areas of ineffectiveness in the life of the organization, where things are not super perfect and super clear and perhaps there are elements of waste. The Gold leader knows that this is the only way to get better and better, and succeed. But he or she can sometimes be seen as too tolerant with some ambiguity.
10. The Gold leader is both very strategic and very tactical, so it does not fit into the assumed bipolar view of the world. In fact, the Gold leader surprises others with the apparent confusion. Often some tactical moves for others are very strategic for the Gold leaders and vice-versa. That distinction does not sit comfortably in the Gold leader's mind.

**IF YOU SEE ONE OF THESE, WORK FOR OR WITH ONE OF THESE, CONGRATULATIONS. IF YOU ARE ONE OF THESE, THINK PLATINUM.**

# Leadership dialects : you are supposed to join a party, but don't get an invitation

The language of leadership is often plain and monotone. Used to explain slides, with a screen behind them, leadership language can be dull. I often sit in large corporate meetings and think that the TV weather forecast guy does a better job.

There are many types of 'leadership dialects' but these 3 are quite relevant. This is why:

**FACTUAL, DESCRIPTIVE:** 'this is the strategic plan, these are the goals, and the challenges; this is what we need to achieve; this is the ambition'. This style is rather common. It's based upon the assumption of the universal goodness of communication. It is informational. If coming from the very top, it may or may not contain a revelation, something new. I am always surprised by how much no-newness is included in some top corporate speeches. Of course, as usual, the value is in the ritual of the top leader addressing the troops. It is 'hearing it from him', more than hearing something new.

**ASPIRATIONAL:** 'we thought it would take us 3 years, here we are today. It's possible, yes, we can do this; we are our own limits'. This dialect is

pulling quite a lot of emotions. It helps with the visualisation of a destiny, small d or capital D. It's not incompatible with the 'factual dialect' but goes well beyond. Obama is here in his acceptance and inauguration speeches.

**INVITATIONAL:** 'come with me, I need you, let's do it together; I can't do it on my own'. It builds upon factual and aspirational, but it creates a new 'pull effect'. I am actually inviting you not just to understand the facts, not only to imagine a future, but to come with me and start walking. In my experience in the corporate arena seeing and hearing leaders talk, these are my informal statistics of what I find: it is about 80% factual, 15% aspirational and 5% invitational. Many leaders simply forget the invitation.

Formal communication training often stops at the obvious: (1) style: be authentic, be yourself, be clear; and (2) content: have key messages, be on target, be specific.

The key question, however, on top of the above, is to know what behaviours you want to trigger. The factual dialect produces, perhaps, clarification, rational and emotional understanding. The aspirational dialect produces motivation. The invitational dialect is trying to trigger action.

**THE INVITATIONAL DIALECT IS THE MOST FORGOTTEN, YET  
POTENTIALLY THE MOST POWERFUL. DON'T LEAVE THE ROOM  
WITHOUT AN INVITATION TO PEOPLE. SMALL ROOM, BIG ROOM,  
SMALL DESTINY, BIG DESTINY, INVITE, ALWAYS INVITE.**

# The leader as a blank screen, on which others project

IN HIS 2003 BOOK *THE AUDACITY OF HOPE*, BARACK OBAMA WROTE:

**'I SERVE AS A BLANK SCREEN ON WHICH PEOPLE OF VASTLY DIFFERENT POLITICAL STRIPES PROJECT THEIR OWN VIEWS. AS SUCH, I AM BOUND TO DISAPPOINT SOME, IF NOT ALL OF THEM.'**

In his last months in the White House, the Accountants of Hope landed to count the Audacity of Hope and were ready to list the done and still-to-do, will never be done. And there were disappointments, as he predicted.

I am not an American. I am a political voyeur, world citizen with a Spanish passport, an organization architect as a profession, passionate about people mobilization in organizations. I am biased. (You too). I do believe that in the not too distant future, not that entity that we call

'History' that we all refer to, meaning several generations back, Obama will be seen as one of the greatest presidents that country has had. And, in saying so, I am of course on a collision course with those who thought that 'Making America Great Again', as Mr Trump's slogan said, would happen by building big walls, widespread insults, carpet bombing and a populist circus.

I am digressing. This Daily Thought was not meant to be a political chat. I think that the little line in Obama's book, 'a blank screen on which people project their own views', is a great metaphor for leadership. We project on leaders our hopes and expectations, also our rejections and judgements. We see on that blank screen what we want to see, not what is there; hear what we want to hear, maybe not what he says; and make judgements on 'the screen' itself with no other foundations than what we want to project, the achievements that we want to see or the disappointments that we have perhaps previously decided we will see.

A reflective leader then should look at himself or herself and watch that projection, see the movie, hear the music.

**AS A LEADER, WHAT I SAY MAY NOT BE WHAT PEOPLE HEAR, WHAT I DO MAY NOT BE WHAT PEOPLE SEE AND WHAT I BUILD MAYBE A HOUSE THAT PEOPLE DON'T WANT. MAYBE, THE TRICK IS, INVENT A SORT OF OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCE, AND WATCH. THAT MAYBE THE BEST AND HANDIEST LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDED.**

# ‘Human’ and ‘leadership’ can go together by inviting our demons for dinner

**IF LEADERSHIP IS A PRAXIS, SOMETHING THAT ‘I’ DO (NAME AND SURNAME HERE, PLEASE), THEN, KNOWING A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE ‘I’ SHOULD HELP. THAT IS WHY REFLECTION AND SELF-AWARENESS ARE SO IMPORTANT.**

Some HR practices have reduced ‘awareness’ to 360 degree feedback. As useful and as mis-used as this is, this is not a substitute for self-reflection.

When deepening into that ‘I’, seriously, a stock of little Pandora’s boxes may be opened. It could be scary, also fun, liberating, depressing and God knows what.

One of those little Pandora’s boxes is labelled ‘contradictions’. This is where all of them are stored. We are bound to find them in pairs, the good and the bad, the ones we like and the ones we don’t, the opposites, our Jekyll & Hyde, our Yin and Yang, what we see and the ones other people see in us etc.

Rejecting half of them (the bad ones) is rejecting half of the ‘I’.

I think it was Friedrich Nietzsche (I am pretty sure but I can’t remember where I got it from, and also I am paraphrasing ad libitum, sorry Fred) who said that the best liberating moment was when he invited all his negative traits, dark sides and flaws to be his friends. Making friends with those, allowed him, will allow us, to invite them to the conversation. Rejecting, abandoning, pretending that they don’t exist, will never lead to any progress.

If we have to ‘rethink our humanity’, as many voices are now saying, for different reasons, including the digitalisation of our life, how about starting by inviting our demons for dinner?

Perhaps, to acknowledge our contradictions (in thinking, in attitudes, in values, in behaviours) it is a good foundation for the practice of leadership. And, by inviting them all to the table, I am pretty sure our humanity coefficient would increase. A good injection of mental health. A good starting point for a healthier ‘practice of leadership’.

Bring the whole ‘I’ for dinner.

