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Before You Lead Anyone Else

# 1

## Earned, Not Assigned

Let's address the question sitting in the back of your mind: What is leadership?

If you're expecting a tidy definition to memorize, we're going to disappoint you. Not because we don't have opinions. We do. But because the most important definition isn't ours. It's yours. And it's going to evolve as you grow.

That said, let's start by clearing away what leadership isn't.

### What Leadership Is Not

**Leadership is not a title.** Being named a leader doesn't make you one. We've all worked with people who had "Director" or "Manager" or "Partner" on their business card but couldn't get anyone to follow them across the street, let alone through a difficult change. In law firms, this shows up in a particular way: equity partnership carries enormous cultural weight, which means some people assume that making partner automatically means you have become a leader. It doesn't. The title

gives you authority on paper, not credibility, trust, or influence. Those must be earned.

The reverse is also true: some of the most effective leaders we've seen in law firms don't have formal leadership titles. They're the people others turn to when things are uncertain. The ones who set the tone. If you're leading with your title, you're not really leading. You're managing through positional authority, and that only works until someone decides they don't care about the org chart.

**Leadership is not tenure.** "I've been here fifteen years" is a statement of fact, not evidence of leadership. Law firms have a particular tendency to conflate institutional knowledge with leadership authority: the person who knows where the bodies are buried, who the difficult clients are, how things have always been done. That knowledge has value. But it isn't leadership. We've seen twenty-year veterans who still operate like individual contributors, and we've seen people two years in who are already developing others and driving meaningful change.

**Leadership is not being the smartest person in the room.** This one's especially relevant in legal environments, where being the person with the answers is how people built their reputation and got promoted. The habits that got you here, knowing the right answer, spotting the flaw in someone else's reasoning, solving the problem faster than anyone else, can quietly undermine you as a leader. If you're always the one with the answers, you're either in the wrong room or you've hired the wrong people. Your value as a leader isn't in having all the answers. It's in asking the right questions, creating conditions for others to succeed, and making decisions that move things forward.

**Leadership is not charisma.** Yes, some great leaders are charismatic.

Others are quiet, methodical, and reserved. Legal culture often mistakes a commanding presence in the courtroom or a confident manner in a partner meeting for leadership. It isn't. Charisma might help you get attention, but it doesn't build trust, develop people, or drive sustainable results. Those require something less visible and more consistent: substance.

**Leadership is not consensus.** Law firms are full of sharp people with strong opinions, which means the path of least resistance is often endless discussion with more input, more rounds of feedback, more time for everyone to weigh in. That can look like thoroughness. Often it's avoidance. Good leaders seek input and make people feel heard, but leadership ultimately requires making decisions, sometimes unpopular ones, and moving forward. If you're waiting for everyone to agree, you're not leading. You're stalling, and people around you know it.

**Leadership is not being liked.** This one's hard because most of us want to be liked. In law firms, where reputation travels fast and relationships span decades, the social cost of conflict feels especially high. But if your primary goal is to be liked, you'll avoid necessary conflict, fail to hold standards, and let problems fester. Good leaders care about their people deeply, but they care more about their people's growth and success than about being their friend. They have hard conversations *because* they care, not in spite of it. Respect matters more than likability. And sometimes, doing the right thing as a leader means making decisions people won't like.

🗨️ **CONSIDER:** *Which of these misconceptions have you carried? Where did it come from?*

## What Leadership Is

Here's the definition that matters:

***Leadership happens in the space between intention and execution.***

It starts with you. How you show up, how you manage yourself under pressure, whether your actions match your words. Before you can lead anyone else, you have to be able to lead yourself.

It extends to the people around you. Developing others instead of just managing them. Building trust. Having the hard conversations. Helping people move from where they are to where they need to be.

It runs through the work itself. Building systems that function without you. Creating accountability. Making hard decisions with imperfect information and owning the outcomes.

And it reaches toward what's next. Translating vision into action. Creating clarity when things are uncertain. Moving the organization from where it is to where it needs to be.

Leadership isn't any one of these things. It's all of them, working together.

We don't pretend leadership is easy, or that there's one right way to do it. Different situations require different approaches. Different people need different things from you. What worked yesterday might not work tomorrow. But there are patterns. There are frameworks. And there are practices that reliably make you better.

Most importantly, leadership is learnable. It's not a personality trait you're born with. It's a set of skills, behaviors, and mindsets you can develop. And it's not just about what you do as a leader. It's who you're becoming.

That's where we start. What's your current definition of leadership? Because the one you're carrying right now, whether you've articulated it or not, is already driving your behavior as a leader.



WORKBOOK Ex 1.1: Your Leadership Definition

Take 10 minutes right now to write down your answers to these questions:

- What does leadership mean to you?
- Who is someone you consider a great leader? What specifically makes them great?
- What kind of leader do you NOT want to be?
- When you think about yourself as a leader, what feels most important to get right?

*The Next Level Leader Work(book)* provides space for deeper reflection and additional prompts. If you're not using the workbook, write your answers in a notebook or document you can return to.

Don't worry if your definition feels incomplete or uncertain. It should. You're at the beginning of something, not the end.

We're going to come back to this at the end of the book. You'll write your definition again, and we're willing to bet it will look different. Not

## BE A NEXT LEVEL LEADER

because your first answer was wrong, but because you'll have language, frameworks, and examples you don't have yet.

## The Identity Shift That Changes Everything

Here's the hardest (and most underestimated) part of becoming a leader: the identity shift from individual contributor to leader.

As an individual contributor, your value was clear. You produced work. You solved problems. You delivered results. Your success was visible and measurable, and directly tied to what you personally did.

You were rewarded for being fast, thorough, and right. For knowing the answer. For getting it done yourself when the stakes were high. For being the person others could count on to deliver.

And then you became a leader.

Suddenly, the rules changed.

**Your success is no longer measured by your output alone. It's measured by your team's output.** By the growth and development of the people you lead. By the culture you create. By the systems you build. By the decisions you make that enable others to do their best work.

You're still expected to be fast, smart, and have the answers. But now you're also supposed to develop people who might become faster and smarter than you. You're supposed to let go of work you're good at so others can learn. You're supposed to spend time on things that don't feel productive: conversations, coaching, planning, and thinking.

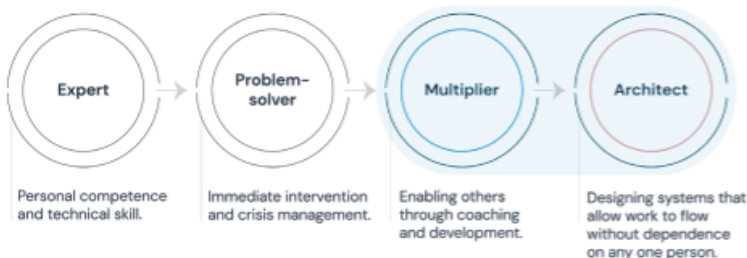
And most people aren't prepared for it. We call this The Identity Shift, and navigating it is what this book is about.

## The Four Leadership Identities

Most leadership books fail to tell you that becoming a leader isn't just one shift. It's a series of identity expansions, each requiring you to add new capabilities while strategically choosing when to leverage the old ones.

Leaders develop through four identities, often moving back and forth between them depending on what the situation requires:

### WHERE EFFECTIVE LEADERS SPEND THEIR TIME



## 1. Expert Value = Personal Competence

This is where you started. You were the person who knew how to do the work exceptionally well. Your value came from your technical skill, knowledge, and ability to execute. People came to you because you had the answers.

This identity feels good. It's concrete. Measurable. You can see the direct result of your work.

As a leader, you'll still operate as Expert when the situation truly requires your specific knowledge, when you're training someone and need to demonstrate the right way, or when the stakes are too high for learning-by-doing. In law firms, this is the administrator who steps in to walk a new hire through the billing system, or the practice group leader who reviews a brief because the client relationship is too important to risk. Staying sharp in your domain matters: it's hard to coach what you've forgotten how to do. A note: not every leader is an expert in their team's function and that's okay. Leading people whose work you don't personally do is its own skill, and we'll address it directly later.

## 2. Problem-Solver Value = Speed and Rescue

When you first moved into leadership, you likely operated here. Something goes wrong? You fix it. Someone's stuck? You jump in. A crisis emerges? You're the hero who saves the day.

This identity also feels good, maybe even better than being the Expert. You're not just competent; you're indispensable. You're the person who can handle anything. The team depends on you.

Here's the problem: Most law firm leaders spend too much time here. The managing partner who becomes the default answer to every personnel conflict. The COO who can't take a day off without someone's crisis following them. The partner who makes every decision on a deal transaction. Things get done. Fires are put out. You feel needed. Your value is visible and immediate.

But when Problem-Solver becomes your default mode, it doesn't scale. It creates dependency instead of capability. It turns you into a bottleneck. And it prevents you from doing the higher-level work that moves the organization forward.

There are times when Problem-Solver is exactly the right mode: a genuine crisis requiring immediate intervention, a situation where someone truly lacks the knowledge or authority to act, or a moment where the cost of failure is too high for it to be a learning opportunity.

**The key is making it the exception, not your default.**

### 3. Multiplier Value = Enabling Others

This is where real leadership begins. You're not abandoning your expertise. You're leveraging it differently. Your value shifts from what you can do to what you can help others do. You're coaching instead of doing. You're asking questions instead of providing answers. You're developing people's capability instead of rescuing them from challenges.

This identity is uncomfortable at first. It feels slower. Less productive. You watch someone struggle with something you could do in half the time, and every instinct tells you to just take it over.

But this is where you start to create leverage. One person developed is more valuable than one problem solved.

You operate as Multiplier when someone has the foundation but needs guidance to grow, when the timeline allows for development rather than just delivery, and when building capability matters as much as getting this specific thing done. This is the practice group leader who asks the associate to walk through their reasoning rather than just correcting the brief. Yes, it's slower in the moment, but it builds something that lasts. This is where you start creating bench strength instead of bottlenecks.

#### 4. Architect Value = Designing Systems

This is the highest leverage: designing the machine rather than operating it. Your value comes from building the systems, processes, and structures that allow good outcomes to happen reliably, with or without you in the room.

You're not solving every problem. You're building systems that prevent problems or surface them early when they're still manageable. You're not making every decision. You're creating clarity about who makes decisions and what information they need to make them well.

You operate as Architect when you see the same problem recurring and recognize it needs a systemic solution, when you're preparing for scale or transition, or when you want decisions and execution to happen without you as the bottleneck. This is the operations director who stops resolving the same scheduling conflict every quarter and builds the system that prevents it. Or the firm administrator who creates the onboarding process so that every new hire's first week stops depending on whoever happens to have time. This is the identity most leaders

under invest in, and the one that compounds most over time.

Most leaders never spend enough time in Architect. They get stuck defaulting to Problem-Solver or spend most of their time in Multiplier but never step back to design the systems that would make both more effective.

The shift to Architect requires trusting your systems more than your personal involvement. That's terrifying for most high performers.

## Choosing Your Mode Intentionally

You don't stop being an Expert or Problem-Solver. You just stop living there.

Great leaders move fluidly between all four identities depending on what the situation requires. Sometimes the crisis is real and you need to jump in and solve it. Sometimes your team needs to see you do the work to learn from you. Sometimes they need you to coach them through it. And sometimes you need to step back entirely and redesign how the work flows.

The difference between stuck leaders and growing leaders isn't which identities they use: it's where they spend most of their time.

**Stuck leaders** default to Expert and Problem-Solver because it feels productive and their value is immediately visible.

**Growing leaders** spend increasing time in Multiplier and Architect because that's where their impact scales beyond what they personally can do.

💬 *CONSIDER: Where do you spend most of your time? When you're stressed or behind, which identity do you retreat to?*

## The Cost of Growth

This transition doesn't come easily.

You must choose development over efficiency. When you could get the bills out in 30 minutes but it takes the new specialist two hours, every instinct screams to just do it yourself. But every time you do, you take away their chance to learn and keep yourself trapped. The shift isn't stopping doing, but knowing when your doing helps and when it hurts.


It means tolerating being slower now to be faster later. Coaching someone through a problem takes longer than solving it yourself. Building a system takes longer than fixing things as they break. But the investment compounds. The time you spend developing people this month creates capacity next month. The system you build this quarter prevents fires next quarter.

You're developing new skills publicly. When you were an expert, you knew what you were doing. As you expand into Multiplier and Architect? You're learning. You're experimenting. You might give feedback that lands wrong. You might delegate poorly. You might design a process that fails in practice. Your team will see all of it.

That's deeply uncomfortable for high performers who built their careers on being competent. But here's what matters: your willingness to learn, admit when something didn't work, and adjust. Those traits model

the leadership culture you're trying to create. A culture where growth matters more than perfection.

You'll have to resist the pull of what feels productive. Solving a problem feels more productive than teaching someone else to solve it. Doing the work feels more productive than designing systems. But if you can't tolerate that temporary inefficiency, you'll never expand beyond Problem-Solver limiting your team's growth to what you personally can do.

 *CONSIDER: What would it cost you to stay at Problem-Solver for the next five years? What would it give you to move to Multiplier?*



WORK(BOOK) Ex 1.4: The Shift: How You're Spending Your Leadership Time & Focus

The identify shift isn't about abandoning your expertise or never solving problems. It's about leveraging your capabilities strategically instead of reactively. You're not becoming less valuable. You're becoming valuable in a way that scales beyond what you can personally do.

That shift doesn't happen overnight. It happens through hundreds of small decisions to coach instead of do, to ask questions instead of give answers, to design systems instead of heroically fixing what's broken, to let someone else learn even when you could do it faster yourself.

The good news? You don't have to figure it out alone. There are

frameworks, practices, and patterns that work.

That's what the Four Cornerstones are for.

***“The shift from expert to leader isn't about working harder.  
It's about working differently.”***

# 3

## The Four Cornerstones

Now that you understand the identity shift required to become an effective leader, let's talk about the framework that will guide your development: the Four Cornerstones.

When leadership works, you can feel it.

The COO sends a firm-wide email about a policy change. It's clear, direct, and explains the why. No one loves the news, but they understand it. Questions get answered quickly. Within a week, it's just how things work now.

People know what's expected of them. They get feedback that helps them grow. Problems surface early, before they become crises. Decisions get made and followed through on. Teams collaborate instead of competing. The best people stay because they want to, not because they have to.

When leadership doesn't work, you can feel that too.

## THE FOUR CORNERSTONES

The managing partner sends a firm-wide email about a policy change. It's vague about what's changing and why. People have questions but aren't sure who to ask. Three different leaders give three different explanations. Two months later, half the firm is still doing it the old way because no one followed through.

Expectations are unclear or constantly shifting. Feedback is either nonexistent or delivered in ways that damage relationships. Problems fester until they explode. Commitments made in meetings quietly drift. People work in silos. Talented people leave for environments where they feel developed, not just put to work.

The difference between those two scenarios isn't luck. It's not personality. And it's not something mystical that only certain people are born with.

The difference is having a foundation.

Think of leadership like a building. You can have a beautiful structure, but if the foundation is weak, the whole thing will eventually crack. The Four Cornerstones are that foundation. The essential elements that must be in place for everything else to work. And the foundation needs to be balanced: if one corner is weak, the whole structure is compromised.

Each cornerstone represents a distinct domain of leadership work:

## The Four Cornerstones

**CORNERSTONE 01**

### Leading Self

**THE INNER WORK**

Leadership starts here. Before you can lead anyone else effectively, you have to lead yourself — managing your reactions, honoring your commitments, and showing up with consistency regardless of what the day brings.

- ⊙ **Self-Awareness** knowing how you come across, not just how you see yourself
- ⊙ **Self-Regulation** staying effective under pressure when others aren't
- ⊙ **Self-Discipline** following through on commitments, even the small ones
- ⊙ **Ownership** taking full responsibility for outcomes without deflection

**CORNERSTONE 02**

### Leading People

**THE RELATIONAL WORK**

Your success is no longer measured by your output. It's measured by your team's output. The shift from doing the work to developing the people who do the work is where most new leaders struggle — and where the biggest leverage lives.

- ⊙ **Building Trust** building the foundation everything else depends on
- ⊙ **Developing Others** growing people, not just deploying them
- ⊙ **Communication** clear, consistent, and calibrated to the person and moment
- ⊙ **Holding Standards** having hard conversations early before problems compound

**CORNERSTONE 03**

### Leading Operations

**THE EXECUTION WORK**

Most firms don't have a strategy problem. They have an execution problem. Leading Operations is about following through on the team's commitments and getting work done — building systems that work reliably and creating the discipline that turns good intentions into real results.

- ⊙ **Prioritization** distinguishing between the urgent and important
- ⊙ **Systems & Processes** processes that work without depending on heroics
- ⊙ **Follow-Through** closing the loop so nothing quietly disappears
- ⊙ **Meeting Discipline** decisions made, captured, and acted on
- ⊙ **Surfacing Problems** creating an environment where bad news travels fast

**CORNERSTONE 04**

### Leading Forward

**THE STRATEGIC WORK**

The first three cornerstones teach you to lead well today. This one is about making tomorrow better than today — seeing around corners, moving the organization forward, and building the influence to make it happen beyond your direct authority.

- ⊙ **Strategic Thinking** seeing what's coming before it arrives
- ⊙ **Vision & Direction** giving people a direction worth following
- ⊙ **Leading Through Change** bringing people along, not just announcing direction
- ⊙ **Innovation & Improvement** questioning the status quo with curiosity, not cynicism
- ⊙ **Influence** leading beyond authority, not just within it

**Leading Self:** The internal work. Your ability to recognize and manage your own state, follow through on commitments, and take ownership without deflection. Before you can lead anyone else effectively, you

must be able to lead yourself.

**Leading People:** The relational work. Building trust, developing others, giving feedback, and having hard conversations. Your success is no longer measured by your output but by your team's output.

**Leading Operations:** The execution work. Where ideas meet reality. Building systems, creating accountability infrastructure, and developing the discipline that makes good outcomes repeatable instead of dependent on heroics.

**Leading Forward:** The strategic work. Strategic thinking, vision, change, and influence. What separates leaders who keep things running from leaders who move things forward. This is how you'll move the organization from where it is to where it needs to be.

These aren't sequential. You don't master one and move to the next. They work together. Strength in one enables strength in others. Weakness in one undermines everything else.

## Get Your Baseline

Before diving in, get a baseline on where you stand across all four cornerstones by taking The Four Cornerstone Leadership Assessment either online or in the workbook. The online self-assessment takes about 10 minutes and gives you a starting point you can compare against when you finish the book. **[BeANextLevelLeader.com/assessment](https://BeANextLevelLeader.com/assessment)**



WORK(BOOK) Ex 1.6: Leadership Self-Assessment: Where You

Stand Right Now

## Strengthen Compounds, Weakness Spreads

You can't build trust with your team (Leading People) if you don't follow through on commitments (Leading Self). Why would anyone trust what you say if your actions don't match your words?

You can't think strategically about tomorrow (Leading Forward) if you're constantly reactive because you haven't developed self-regulation (Leading Self). Strategic thinking requires space and clarity. Reactivity crowds both out.

You can't execute well (Leading Operations) if you can't have difficult conversations needed to address performance issues (Leading People). Systems don't run themselves. People run them. And when people aren't performing, no system can compensate.

You can't develop others effectively (Leading People) if you keep reverting to Problem-Solver mode instead of stepping into Multiplier and Architect (Leading Self). Development requires letting go. If you can't let go, you can't develop.

Strong leaders develop all four cornerstones. They know which cornerstone they're naturally strongest in. That's usually the one that feels most comfortable, most like "just who I am." They also know which cornerstone requires more intentional effort. That's the one that feels awkward, the one they're tempted to skip.

The framework gives you a way to diagnose what's not working and a

clear path to address it. When something isn't going well, you can ask: *Which cornerstone am I neglecting?*

## A Few Things Worth Clarifying

Before we go further, let's be clear about what the Four Cornerstones framework is not:

**A checklist.** You can't just work your way through it once and be done. Leadership development is ongoing. You'll revisit these cornerstones throughout your entire career, each time at a deeper level.

**A personality assessment.** This isn't about discovering your "type" and accepting your limitations. Every leader can develop all four cornerstones. Some will come more naturally than others, but none are optional.

**Permission to ignore your weaknesses.** You might be tempted to lean into your strengths and delegate around your weaknesses. Sometimes that's strategic. Often, it's avoidance. The goal is to be strong enough in all four that your weaknesses don't undermine your strengths.

**Rigid.** Different situations require different emphasis. A crisis might require more Leading Self and Leading Operations. A major change initiative might require more Leading Forward and Leading People. The framework gives you a map, but you still must navigate the terrain in front of you.

**Just theory.** Every cornerstone translates into specific, learnable practices. That's what the rest of this book is about: not just understanding the framework but developing the skills that make you strong in each

area.

Let's get started with the foundation: **Leading Self.**

## 4

# Start Here: Before You Can Lead Anyone Else

Sarah walked into the Monday morning team meeting fifteen minutes late, coffee in one hand, phone in the other, visibly flustered. “Sorry, sorry,” she muttered, dropping into her chair. “Just got off a call with the managing partner about the accounts receivable project. Complete disaster.”

The energy in the room shifted immediately. People who had been engaged in conversation went quiet. Relaxed postures tightened.

Sarah spent the next forty minutes half-present, checking her phone, sighing heavily, interrupting updates to redirect to urgent items. When someone raised a concern about an upcoming deadline, she snapped: “Well, we’ll just have to figure it out, won’t we?”

By the time the meeting ended, the team was anxious, unclear on priorities, and already bracing for a difficult week.

Three floors up, Marcus walked into his team’s Monday morning

meeting early, settled, and focused. “Morning, everyone. Before we dive in, I want to acknowledge we’re dealing with some uncertainty this week on the tech update roll outs. I don’t have all the answers yet, but here’s what I know, here’s what I’m working on finding out, and here’s how we’re going to move forward in the meantime.”

The room relaxed. Not because the problem was solved, but because Marcus was calm, clear, and present. By the time the meeting ended, the team knew exactly what to focus on.

Same Monday. Same firm. Same level of pressure.

Two very different outcomes.

## Leaders bring the weather.

Your mood, your energy, your presence sets the tone for everyone around you. When you walk into a room stressed, distracted, or negative, your team feels it. Similarly, they’ll feel it when you’re calm, focused, and steady.

This isn’t about faking positivity or pretending everything’s fine when it’s not. It’s about managing your internal state so that you can lead effectively, even when things are hard. Especially when things are hard.

Before you can lead anyone else, you have to be able to lead yourself.

***“Leaders bring the weather.”***

If you can’t manage your own stress, you can’t create stability for your team. If you don’t follow through on your commitments, no one will

trust you. If you deflect responsibility when things go wrong, your team learns to do the same. If you're unpredictable, people spend more energy managing you than doing their work.

Think about the best leader you've ever worked with. They were probably steady. You knew what to expect. They didn't fall apart under pressure. They followed through on what they said they'd do. They didn't blame others when things went wrong. You could count on them.

The difference between great leaders and bad ones isn't intelligence or instinct. It starts with self-leadership. Not because the other cornerstones don't matter, but because none of them hold without this one.

## It's Not About Being Perfect

Leading Self means managing your internal state: your emotions, attention, and judgment. It means being intentional about which information, requests, and inputs you engage with and which you consciously ignore or defer. It means following through on commitments, taking ownership without deflection, and building the kind of consistency that makes you someone people can rely on.

It's not about being perfect. It's not about never having a bad day or feeling stressed or overwhelmed. It's about managing those feelings, so they don't manage you. It's about creating space between what happens and how you respond, so you can choose your response instead of being hijacked by your reaction.

These aren't personality traits. They're skills. And like all skills, they're learnable.

 *CONSIDER: What happens when you're under pressure?*



WORK(BOOK) EX 2.1 Leaders Bring the Weather: A Pre-Game Check for High-Stakes Moments

## Four Skills. All Learnable

Each one builds on the others, and together, they form the foundation everything else in this book depends on.

**Self-Awareness** is knowing how you show up, not just how you see yourself. Understanding your triggers, patterns, strengths, blind spots, and the gap between your intentions and your impact.

**Self-Regulation** requires you manage your emotional responses so you stay effective. Creating space between stimulus and response. Staying present under pressure instead of going dark or becoming reactive.

**Self-Discipline** means following through on commitments, tackling difficult things early, and holding yourself to the same standards you expect from others.

**Ownership** asks you to take full responsibility for outcomes. Owning mistakes. Speaking as the leader. Making decisions and being willing to be wrong.

The time you invest here pays dividends in every other area of your

START HERE: ...

leadership. When you're steady, your team can focus on the work instead of managing you. When you follow through, people trust you. When you own your part, your team learns to do the same. Leading Self isn't selfish. It's the most generous thing you can do as a leader.

The rest of this section on Leading Self will take you deeper into each of these elements. You'll learn what they look like in practice, why they matter, and how to develop them.

But you can't manage what you can't see. So we start with awareness.