

LEADING WITH DEPTH

The Impact of Emotions and
Relationships on Leadership

Claudia Nagel



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To ISPSO

*The International Society for the Psychoanalytic
Study of Organizations*

My professional home base

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Acknowledgements

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This society is a very special community of like-minded people who study and work with all kinds of organisations with the aim to understand the unconscious dynamics within them. Therefore, I would like to sincerely thank, first of all, my case contributors—experts in their field and personal and professional friends—who were willing to share their own experiences in our field of work, followed by all my friends and colleagues from ISPSO and around it. I have learned so much from you and with you and I am incredibly grateful to you and to be part of our community.

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Two very dear friends and artists in their field have written forewords from their respective position. The first one, my very dear Bolko von Oetinger, who has a strong background in management and strategy, is one of the best thinkers I know, clear, concise, curious and always ready to discuss and reflect further. His mind is ready to question what is happening in the world and to incessantly pursue new ideas and approaches. It is always a great pleasure to be the counterpart of these conversations. Thank you, dear Bolko, for your deeply reflective preface from a leader's perspective.

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About the author and contributors

Author

Prof Dr Claudia Nagel is a consultant, coach, author, and senior advisor to international organisations and their board members. She is a full professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam holding a chair in change and identity. As an economist (MBA), organisational psychologist (PhD), and chartered psychoanalyst (ISAP), Claudia is an expert on strategic management, leadership, and change processes. She runs her own consulting business, Nagel & Company, and is past president of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO). She talks and publishes extensively on behavioural strategy, and recently wrote *Psychodynamic Coaching* (Routledge, 2020) and can be contacted at claudia.nagel@nagel-company.com.

Contributors

Gilles Amado, PhD (in psychology), is emeritus professor of organisational psychosociology at HEC Paris (École des hautes études commerciales de Paris). He is one of the founding members of the International

Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO), of Le Centre International de Recherche, de Formation et d'Intervention en Psychosociologie (CIRFIP), an associate member of the Research Centre on Work and Development (CRTD) at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), a member of La Société Française de Psychothérapie Psychanalytique de Groupe (SFPPG). He was the co-chief editor of the *Revue Internationale de Psychosociologie* (1994–2005), then of the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychosociologie* (2005–2018). His articles and books deal with group dynamics, organisational change, work psychology, leadership, and the use of the systems psychodynamics approach. He conducts international interventions and supervision sessions within the private and public sectors.

Birgitte Bonnerup holds an MA in psychology, University of Copenhagen. She is a registered psychologist, and a qualified specialist and supervisor in organisational psychology. She is a partner in organisational psychologists Bonnerup & Hasselager in Copenhagen, where she works as a therapist and organisational consultant. She holds a position as an external lecturer on the master's degree course in organisational psychology at the University of Roskilde, Denmark. She has been a member of ISPSO since 2008. In 2019 Routledge published *Love and Loneliness at Work*, her book co-written with Annemette Hasselager. In 2022 she contributed a chapter to *The Covid Trail* edited by Halina Brunning and Olya Khaleelee, published by Routledge. She can be contacted at www.bonnerup-hasselager.dk.

Philip Boxer BSc MBA PhD brings many years of strategy consulting experience to developing clients' capabilities for leadership within highly networked environments subject to the effects of digitalisation. He uses approaches that enable clients to scale learning across networked organisations and develop the agility of supporting business platforms. Philip is a member of the (Lacanian) Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research and the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations. His research and writing are focused on ways of understanding and working through the maladaptive responses of client systems to the demand for one-by-one responses within turbulent business ecosystems.

Halina Brunning is a chartered clinical psychologist, organisational consultant, and executive coach. Halina has published extensively on clinical and organisational issues, has edited seven books for Karnac, including *Executive Coaching: Systems-Psychodynamic Perspective* (2006). She conceived the idea of a trilogy of books which examined the contemporary world through a psychoanalytic lens. This approach continued in her latest books co-written with Olya Khaleelee: *Danse Macabre and Other Stories: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Global Dynamics* and *The Covid Trail: Psychoanalytic Explorations*, both published by Phoenix Publishing House.

Annemette Hasselager is a psychologist and a specialist and supervisor in organisational psychology. She is a partner in Bonnerup & Hasselager where she works as an organisational psychologist and therapist with individuals, groups, and organisations. She is an external lecturer at MPO, a master's degree course in organisational psychology at Roskilde University, Denmark. She writes books and articles on organisational psychology. In 2019 Routledge published *Love and Loneliness at Work*, her book co-written with Birgitte Bonnerup. She has been a member of ISPSO since 2004. She can be contacted at www.bonnerup-hasselager.dk.

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the distinguished clinical professor of leadership development and organizational change at INSEAD in France. He is also a psychoanalyst. He is the author, co-author, or editor of more than fifty books and hundreds of articles. His books and articles have been translated into twenty-five languages. As an educator and consultant, he has worked in more than forty countries. In addition, he is the recipient of many awards, including four honorary doctorates. *The Financial Times*, *Le Capital*, *The Economist*, and *El País* have all judged him as one of the world's leading thinkers on management.

Olya Khaleelee is a corporate psychologist and organisational consultant with a particular interest in leadership and organisational transition and transformation. She was director of OPUS: An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society from 1980 to 1994, is a professional partner of the Tavistock Institute, and was the first female director of the Leicester Conference on the theme of authority, leadership, and

organisation. She has published extensively in the areas of leadership and system psychodynamics in organisations, and beyond, in society. Recently she has co-authored two books with Halina Brunning: *Danse Macabre and Other Stories: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Global Dynamics*; and as co-editors of *The Covid Trail*.

Fiona Martin, MA, is an organisational consultant, coach, and researcher. Her research interest is the impact of disruptive environments, including climate change, on management, and group dynamics especially in relation to the capacity of organisations to remain focused on purpose and their ability to learn from their experiences. Her current research is into barriers and enablers to research utilisation, organisational learning, and animal–human relations. Her findings have practical application for the understanding of group dynamics in contemporary organisations. She has authored and co-authored academic papers, is a member of the editorial board of *Socioanalysis*, a director of Group Relations Australia, and a member of the organising committee of the NIODA (National Institute of Organisation Dynamics Australia) Symposium 2017–22.

Dr Ajit Menon is currently the head of people and organisation at Investec PLC. He has more than twenty years of experience working in the areas of culture, organisation development, change, and HR. Prior to joining Investec, Ajit was a strategic leadership and organisational consultant. He built and ran his own organisational consulting practice, Blacklight Advisory Ltd., delivering strategic people and organisation solutions to companies across multiple industries and geographies. Ajit has a doctorate in organisational consulting, has been a visiting faculty member at Tavistock and Portman, London School of Economics, and University College London, and recently co-authored a book, *What Lies Beneath: How Organisations Really Work* (Phoenix, 2021).

Dr Rose Redding Mersky has been an organisational development consultant to a wide variety of private, public, non-profit, and professional organisations for more than thirty years. Her many publications have focused primarily on the practice of consultation and the utilisation of socio-analytic methodologies in both organisational and research

practice. She is a Distinguished Member of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations, and she served as its first female president. She is an honorary professor at the National Research University: Higher School of Economics in Moscow, where she teaches master classes. Her new book, *The Social Dream-Drawing Workshop: A Handbook for Professionals* has just been published by Routledge. She is an American citizen living in Germany and can be contacted at rose.mersky@dream-drawing.com.

Malachi O'Connor, PhD, principal at CFAR (Center for Applied Research), a US management consulting firm, has worked for more than thirty years with senior executives and managers across a broad range of for-profit, non-profit, and public sector organisations. Mal's approach to consulting combines his training as an ethnographer with a psychodynamic, systems thinking model. He applies this framework in his work with clients on strategy and system-wide strategic change, board and executive development, mergers and acquisitions, and making the business case for cultural diversity. He is co-author of *The Moment You Can't Ignore: When Big Trouble Leads to a Great Future*, published by Public Affairs Books in October 2014.

Larissa Philatova is an executive and team coach and HR consultant. Larissa has twenty years of experience in talent recruitment management and offers professional advice on career, education, and HR solutions for corporate and small business clients, focused on advising clients on building a more reliable and well-suited business and HR policy. Larissa explores the negative capability of a leader; the basis of the study was her master's thesis "Leadership through the prism of psychoanalysis: negative capability as a key skill in the pre-uncertainty" at Moscow Higher School of Economics.

Martin Ringer, BE (Hons), MEd, is an author and artist who has a passion for understanding human behaviour in groups, organisations, and communities. His work history includes engineering, directing a bi-cultural adventure therapy programme in New Zealand and management consulting and coaching, as well as lecturing at a number of different universities in social work, group dynamics, psychodynamics,

psychotherapy, and experiential learning. His publications include a book on group dynamics and experiential learning and he is lead editor of a recent edited book, *The Collective Spark: Igniting Thinking in Groups, Organizations and the Wider World*.

Rob Ryan is a psychoanalytically informed organisational consultant, executive coach, facilitator, writer, and director of wisdom+work—a boutique consulting firm based in Melbourne, Australia. He provides consulting services in individual and team leadership development, analytic coaching, strategic thinking, organisation and service reviews, and governance. Working in government, business, and not-for-profit sectors he has designed and led many leadership development programs with a focus on systems psychodynamics and strengths-based approaches. Rob's work is informed by his extensive experience in roles including consultant, CEO, educator, board president, regional ISPSO co-convenor and, until recently, Director of Administration of ISPSO.

Kalina Stamenova, PhD, is an academic, researcher, and consultant working at the University of Essex, UK. Her current research interests include the psychoanalytic understanding of online dynamics in teams and organisations working in virtual environments. She has co-edited with R. D. Hinshelwood *Methods of Research in the Unconscious: Applying Psychoanalytic Ideas to Social Science* (Routledge, 2018). She is also a book review editor for the *Journal of Organisational and Social Dynamics*.

Preface—The magic mirror on the wall

Bolko von Oetinger

Rarely have I read a management book so intensively in one go, and rarely did the reading make me so thoughtful as *Leading with Depth* by Claudia Nagel. I asked myself what spirit breathes from this book and why it is decidedly worth reading for managers. As so often with complex matters, at first glance the answer seems to be simple: it is about the performance of managers. But behind this lies an almost impenetrable intricacy. For Claudia Nagel, it is about the leader as an emotional human being, about his or her relationships with other people and within organisations that are supported by individuals or other organisations.

From important management meetings we know the significance of the so-called “elephant in the room”. Like all dead metaphors, this says it all, but doesn’t ask any new questions. That is exactly the starting point of the book: we have to have the courage to look in the mirror and ask ourselves what emotions are driving us and others involved when we argue about supposedly factual issues. We know that something in the deep unconscious exists within us and affects our actions as decision makers. We may have a vague idea of what it might be about, but we cannot operationalise it and consciously block it out. The book takes us into this mysterious land.

You can't read the book without asking yourself, what does my deep inner self look like? Wouldn't I myself have to get more clarity about my emotions and their causes in order to understand myself and then put myself in the shoes of others? Fortunately, Claudia Nagel does not offer a checklist, the complexity and respect for the individual is too great for that, but she wanders through so many fields that a voice in the reader stirs: "Watch out, this could also be the case with you, you have experienced this before, here you need to know more about yourself, this could help you ..."

This voice of the reader, that is, one's own voice, which becomes louder and clearer in the course of reading, is the great value creation that the book evokes. The voice tells me that I should not stand in my own way, that I should not avoid self-exploration of my emotions when it comes to big decisions with which we associate many hopes, but also many fears. The fact that the exploration of one's own emotions is often fruitless has to do with the concern that we might learn something about ourselves that instils fear. Claudia Nagel therefore talks at the end of the book about the courage to look into one's own "abyss".

Readers learn how experiences from the past, perhaps from their early youth, which they are no longer aware of, influence their current performance. Of course, it is very reassuring to gain more insights of what strongly influences us unconsciously. Equally important, these insights are very helpful to run our daily operations, for example to convince our employees to follow us, to make better strategic choices or initiate innovations more courageously. The prerequisite is to better assess the elephants that have been riding us for a long time. It would not do the book's seriousness and academic depth any good to put it under the journalistic category of "How to become more successful" guidebooks, but there is no doubt that knowledge of the largely unknown territory within oneself is an important prerequisite for more effective leadership.

The current accumulation of distortions such as climate crises, energy crises, pandemics, technological disruptions, wars, and inflation requires an assessment from a variety of perspectives in order to define the space of possibilities that is constantly shifting. As leaders, we must lead our own organisation to explore this space without fear—on the contrary, with an appetite for ambiguity—and to catch the faint signals that hint dimly at the new. The power to lead thousands

of employees into a new space is not genetically given; Claudia Nagel constantly points out that leadership can be learned and changed and that, however, one has to start with oneself. She demands that we must be in contact with ourselves. Self-awareness can be promoted through self-reflection and self-discovery.

The image of the leader that emerges here is the opposite of what can be called the “Davos man”. The “Masters of the Universe”, who fly into Davos every year, seem to know everything, believe they have everything under control, and mutually confirm each other. They already have all the answers. With Claudia Nagel, on the other hand, we discover leaders who are quite different, men and women who ask themselves questions about themselves, who are not free of fear, who know that their view of the world is shaped by their implicit emotional assumptions, their life experiences, personality traits, their organisations, and the situation in which they are placed, and who are sufficiently aware of this.

Reading the book inevitably raises the question, do I really want to take this arduous path, to know more about myself? This is where hope and fear come into play. However, the hope of discovering undreamed-of possibilities should be greater than the fear of finding out things about oneself that seem scary. Claudia Nagel uses a pedagogical trick to show the reader that the world of the unconscious can be explored step by step. Each new important thought in the book is followed by a small case study written by colleagues of the author. These case studies show that problems cannot be so easily traced back to a few causes; we humans are too complicated and too different to fit into a few boxes. The case studies include personal background (parental home, siblings, partner relationships, etc.) and organisational conditions. You get a feeling that the person we are dealing with is not only a functioning manager who manages his or her tasks rationally, but also an individual with his own personal family history, her burdens, his emotions, and everything else that influences him and her consciously and unconsciously. This makes the individuals in the case studies sympathetic; they become a kind of colleagues of the reader.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the individual, the second on the organisation. Both are closely linked: it is individuals under a unified leadership that form the organisation. Traditionally we measure organisational success in financial figures, customer satisfaction, innovative strength, or whatever the

organisation defines as success. A manager is only successful if, in addition to assessing the factual tasks, he or she mobilises the organisation to achieve demanding goals. The higher the position in the company, the more the ability of social coordination comes to the fore and thus the management of human relationships and emotions. Particularly in major change processes, the manager is required not only to have the highest level of personal performance but also to be able to respond to the fears of the employees, the depths of which are largely unknown.

Nothing is more uncertain than the future. The illusions that we can guess the future (“illusions of foresight”) are fed by the fear of the future. Everything that can be estimated falls under calculable-risk decisions. Ambiguous surprises, on the other hand, belong to decisions under uncertainty. There are no management tools for them. Business leaders must therefore be required not to fear ambiguities, ambivalences, surprises, crises, but to feel a pleasure in the resulting potential opportunities. Claudia Nagel recommends that managers create a thinking space in which those concerned can examine and reflect together their thought patterns and implicit assumptions based on their emotional history. In this way, a potential solution space is jointly developed in the strategy process, in which the conscious and the unconscious, fantasy and reality intermingle. Strategy is thus not only a rational process, but a process that is shaped by a few individuals and their conscious and unconscious assumptions. Practitioners are aware that strategy is much more person-bound than strategy concepts suggest, but what the deeper drivers are is hardly ever explained. This is what one learns in Claudia Nagel’s book.

Most business books describe what happens on the surface of the actors, with references to psychological factors, but what happens behind the stage of the actors is largely left out because access to this is difficult without appropriate training and experience at the border between business and psyche. Claudia Nagel has this access and has made the visit backstage extremely readable.

Prof Dr Bolko von Oetinger
Co-founder and former chairman, BCG Germany
Professor for Strategic Management at the WHU-Otto
Beisheim Business School of Management

Foreword

Anton Obholzer

When Claudia asked me to write a foreword, I had no hesitation whatsoever as I valued and respected her work and felt honoured to be asked! It was only when the book arrived on my doorstep that I realised what I had let myself in for. I had expected a traditional paper such as happens among colleagues in the brotherhood and sisterhood of coaching and consultancy. What had arrived was an encyclopaedia such as has never existed since time immemorial.

I had expected to write an informative introduction to the work and perhaps propose a toast to the author-editor of the work about to be launched! The work as it exists left no gap whatsoever for my intentions, for it covered the entire field of knowledge past, present, and future in as much as one can look into the unknowable developments on the distant horizon.

So, what is to be done?

Calm down, something is going to turn up, but then again that eventuality is already in the text along with a plethora of other ways out of the emotional Sargasso Sea. For those not familiar with sailing, it is where all ships are becalmed, there is no breeze to sail away, and the ships are marooned, growing seaweed on their hulls that slow them even

more should a breeze arrive! So, how to comply with the requirement of writing a foreword to this unique and detailed volume of information covering the field of leadership, management, coaching, and organisational processes and realities?

I remembered when as a medical student we all got massive textbooks detailing the world's illnesses. All of us found that we had symptoms of just about every serious disease in the universe. It struck me that anybody looking at this book might fall into the same trap that I have just mentioned: namely, that every possible dynamic as described in the text, both personal- and work-wise, might be seen as being present in the reader's life and occupation.

The other image that came to mind occurred when, after a long-term business school event, every student called the local transport service to ship large boxes of lecture notes back to their home or work addresses. And what have you done with them since, I asked one graduate? "Oh, I use them to prop up my office door." I thought he had done well to not let the supposed "proper" learning blight his personal growth and development.

As far as doing your work, my view is that "properness" must come from your inner-world consciousness with appropriate inclusion of new ideas and concepts, and the awareness that there is a risk of throwing your traditional work baby out with your bathwater. This book is the finest one to be found in the field and its encyclopaedic contents make for excellent opinions and facts for incorporation in your work. But it must be recognised as encouraging further growth, not as a device to diminish your personal experience and learning.

For you, the result must be based on ongoing insight and monitoring your inner-world reaction to everything that makes its appearance in your professional performance. In addition the whole operation must of course take into account social and community factors, the nature of the industry to which you are consulting or belonging to, and the risks and benefits of the relevant interactions. You should be present as a thoughtful and observant visiting anthropologist, entitled and expected to share your observations in and with the individuals and the setting in which you are conducting your work.

And most importantly, retain your right and capacity to ask stupid questions. Your observations and stupid questions are the only

antidote to the common institutional dynamic of being drawn into the institutional state of mind that exists in the setting that you are supposed to observe and comment on.

A colleague of mine told me how his grandmother always put dummy plugs into power sockets to stop electricity leaking into and interfering with the atmosphere in her house. It is a good metaphor for “This is the way we do things here” leaking into the institutional atmosphere and the observer, to the detriment of objectivity and insight.

A word of “warning” about this book: under NO circumstances read it from cover to cover! It would leave you with a whirlpool of ideas and uncertainty about your work and professionalism.

This advice is followed with a recommendation that I strongly support: you could not find a better and more informative response, if you need to pursue an idea that is firmly lodged in your mind and needs a helping nudge, than to look it up in this volume—but nothing more than that at any one time.

You need to allow yourself time for reflection, playfulness, and fun. This book will heighten your self-awareness and your confidence in your professionalism. But beware—do not make it your Bible. You need other reading material, poetry, etc. to balance your life. Beware of falling into the trap of only having mainly work friends in your personal circle! There must be a non-professional side of your life that is actively pursued. That side is an essential counterweight to your work! Without it you are at risk of boredom and loss of creativity.

So by all means have this book by your bedside along with a notebook and pencil to record your dreams. They might very well shine a light that this book misses out on! The book also acts as a magnetic marker of your personal valency, what strengths you bring to your work, and what your Achilles heel is that undermines your work competence and life. I rest my case!

Anton Obholzer
Emeritus psychiatrist and psychoanalyst
Chief executive, Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust and
faculty member, INSEAD

Overview

This book is about the hidden influences that emotions and relationships have on leadership. It explores their impact on the lives of leaders as individuals and as part of larger units such as groups, teams, organisations, and all other kinds of systems. It is written for incoming and experienced leaders who want to learn more about their own inner emotional life while being in a leading role. It will help you to explore and deepen your self-awareness and your personal way of executing leadership.

The book consists of two parts: the first part deals with the leader as an individual, whereas the second part takes the organisational and thus systemic context of leadership into account. Each part develops from a theoretical perspective to more practical and method-oriented questions and chapters. The first chapter of each part is purely theoretical, whereas the following chapters are complemented by case studies.¹ The case studies are written by well-known experts (coaches, consultants, or academics) in the respective field and, referring to their own experience, explore and apply some of the theory or phenomenon explained in the respective chapter. It makes sense to read each chapter

as a whole to develop a full understanding of the depicted subject matter. Each chapter concludes with a brief overview of the key learnings.

In the introduction I give a very basic overview of the ground from which the hidden aspects of leadership emerge, that is, the unconscious and its different notions and understandings. I would recommend reading the introduction before diving into any of the other chapters.

The first part, which explores how emotions and relationships develop and by that present how you as a leader develop, comprises eight chapters. Chapter 1 is about the development of your inner emotional landscape from infant to adult and the subsequent patterns of relating with other human beings; it provides the theoretical framework upon which our entire understanding of the world is built. In Chapter 2 we look at the key tasks of the leader—holding and containment. Both are important prerequisites and part of negative capability, which is the capacity to manage difficult feelings in decision-making moments to let new thoughts emerge instead of prematurely jumping into action. The case of Larissa Philatova describes how a leader finds his negative capability over time. The capability to create hope and identity is the result of the interplay of these three different “leadership ingredients”. How dysfunctional leaders can be is the subject of Chapter 3, and Manfred Kets de Vries shows us the functioning of a narcissistic leader. We also look at what is needed to become an effective leader.

Chapter 4 summarises recent scientific insights and neuroscience research into our seven basic emotional systems and discusses their importance for leadership. Fiona Martin and I analyse a firefighter case from this perspective.

Chapter 5 delves into our family bonds and the role siblings play in the development of the individual as a leader. In the following case study we look at a young CEO to understand how his family ties shape his professional reactions. Chapter 6 to 8 are devoted to more practical subjects. Chapter 6 investigates whether and how women lead differently. In his case study, Rob Ryan analyses how a coaching client falls into some of the “female leadership traps”. How leaders emerge, are made, chosen, and what you need to do to develop into a leadership role are depicted in Chapter 7. Here, Olya Khaleelee shares a few of her secrets about how she selects leaders and what she looks for. In the next chapter we examine whether leadership coaching will benefit you and

what it may contribute. In her case study, Halina Brunning illustrates how leadership coaching may work.

The second part of the book looks at you as a leader in the surroundings of a system, be it a group, team, or organisation.

Chapter 9 investigates organisational and social defences which help us manage our fear, anxiety, and other difficult feelings in the realm of work. It is a basic theoretical introduction to this extremely important field of knowledge since it is almost always at play when people come together to work.

Chapter 10 provides an overview of decision-making, especially strategic decision-making, and explains why it is so difficult. In his case study, Mal O'Connor shares with us what happens when not all strategic options are carefully considered and no real decision is taken. Here we also look at the moral impact of having to make choices.

In Chapter 11 we focus on the difficulties of developing creativity and innovation in organisations and what you as a leader can do to overcome this challenge. Gilles Amado describes in his case study how a tennis player found his inner, creative space to overcome his likely loss of the match. The locker room is the symbol for this space.

Chapter 12 explores the essential demands that strategising makes on organisational leaders, that is, thinking together. This should be a leader's basic requirement, yet this is often not fulfilled because it is more difficult than it seems. Martin Ringer demonstrates in his case study the development of a thinking-together process in preparing for a joint venture. In Chapter 13 we delve into organisational culture, how it develops, and how to understand it from a symbolic perspective. Rose Mersky's use of social dream-drawing explores what an applied symbolic perspective can contribute to overcoming group conflict. We also take a look at deep roles and organisational archetypes.

Chapter 14 is the pivotal chapter in this second part and is both theoretical and practical—it drills down into systems thinking and its different facets as well as what it means to lead a system. The second half explores how leaders can support collaboration between organisations and how to overcome the inherent fallacies. In the case study I share some research results on collaboration in hybrid organisations.

The last four chapters are focused on the more practical questions of leading (in) systems.

In Chapter 15 we look at the clashes of cultures when organisational mergers and joint ventures take place and the subsequent emotional journey that needs to be understood and managed by you as a leader. Ajit Menon analyses the failing case of a merger and the reasons behind it.

In Chapter 16 we examine the role of two important emotions for all of us and what they have to do with you as a leader: love and loneliness. In their case study, Annemette Hasselager and Birgitte Bonnerup showcase how a professional friendship develops, how this is a form of expressing love, and the impact it has on a business. Chapter 17 explores the emotional questions around the digitalisation of our world of work. It also looks at the emotional effect that artificial intelligence has on us. Phil Boxer leads us through one of his digitalisation projects in his case study. The closing chapter focuses on a very current subject—how to lead hybrid teams and how to lead virtually. Kalina Stamenova then shares with us her research insights on working together via Zoom.

Finally, I summarise my reasons for writing this book and I give an outlook on the key competencies and capabilities that will be needed by future leaders.

And now let us get started!

Introduction—Hidden forces

What makes you move as a leader

What first comes to mind when you think about leadership and performance? You may think about the results you want to achieve for your company, the time frame, the underlying strategy, productivity, a functioning IT and communication system; maybe you want to create a good organisational structure, or be a successful leader? You may even ponder what your personal success might look like.

But you might also think about motivating people, aligning them behind a goal, making them willing to work and to enjoy their work, supporting them, giving them advice, controlling them, telling them what they must do and so on.

In any case, you must work together with people. At the beginning of their career, most leaders think that if you tell a person exactly what to do, they will do exactly that. Well, this idea is swept aside after a while (hopefully), as you begin to understand how different people are and quite how different their understanding of what you tell them can be. How come, you might think? How can that be? I have explained everything so clearly, concisely, and several times with different words—and

yet, the other does not understand what I say in the way I understand it and as I want him or her to understand. Something is lost in the transmission. The reasons for this aren't complicated: the way people listen to you (not very well, with a subjective individual focus), the way you say something (your behaviour and your attitude, the words you choose—we will talk about that), the person's personality and character and, of course, their cognitive intelligence.

Yet there exists more than what you perceive from this conscious and obvious perspective. There is a world beneath the carpet, behind the curtain, beyond rationalism and reason. Something that is influencing us, something which one could describe as what lies underneath the visible part of an iceberg. We call it the *unconscious mind* or the *unconscious*.

There are two main scientific approaches to making sense of this invisible part of the iceberg—one takes place through philosophy and psychology² and the other through the neurosciences. We will look at both over the course of this book.

The unconscious

The idea of the unconscious mind³ is considered to have come into being around the beginning of the twentieth century, when psychoanalysis was developed—within neuroscience and psychology—as a fashionable way to understand the psyche and psychological pathologies. The unconscious was part of the *zeitgeist*.⁴ Freud and Jung were important founding fathers of the new field of psychoanalysis, which developed quickly into a method of helping people get to know themselves better. The first ideas around a dynamic psyche and of suppressing perceptions had already appeared a century earlier.⁵ Hartmann wrote a bestseller in 1869⁶ synthesising the ideas of Hegel, Schelling, and Schopenhauer in *Philosophie des Unbewussten* (Philosophy of the Unconscious), which connects the cognitive, irrational, and volitive aspects of the unconscious.

However, long before this development, mind and soul were linked and universally used in art and literature—think of the age of romanticism, or Goethe, who used it in much of his work, for example in *Elective Affinities*. In animistic religions and in Christianity, the soul

was understood as the mediator between the spiritual world (God or the gods) and the material world (the body of humans). Later, the link between the mind and the soul, its metaphysical and spiritual connection, was lost, and today the word soul is not used as much as it once was, although it conveys clearly a deeper and more emotional level in us humans. Consequently, the mind was stripped of its rich network of connotations and history. Mind seems to sound more digestible, more abstract, and not so far detached from a rational, reason-based understanding. Esoteric movements have unfortunately added to the bad reputation of the word soul.

Nevertheless, Freud did use the word *Seele* in his writings (soul, psyche), yet this was mostly and wrongly translated as “mind”. Freud was not only the first self-styled psychoanalyst, he was also a great writer whose works are a pleasure to read. Most people know of his model of the psyche that differentiates the ego, the id, and the superego; it has entered mainstream and day-to-day language. For Freud, the unconscious is the realm of suppressed memories and emotions, and also of socially unacceptable wishes, desires, and ideas. These suppressed drives are always looking for fulfilment and entail a longing for what once was, or a “paradise lost”.⁷ Following Freud, many more thinkers further developed and applied the notion of the unconscious—C. G. Jung, Anna Freud, Neumann, Ferenczi, Kohut, Bion, Melanie Klein, Lacan, and many others.

Advances in the neurosciences have seen this field invest more and more research into the unconscious mind, and there is an attempt to apply some of the insights gained to all kinds of concepts, such as neuro-leadership, neuro-marketing, neuro-finance, neuro-coaching, and what have you. These approaches seek to explain how biases work and how they influence our decision-making. *Thinking Fast and Slow*, the famous book by the Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahnemann,⁸ describes how the brain uses two different ways or levels of thinking: the fast system, automatic and impulsive, is based on emotions and biases (which are always connected to emotions), and the slow system, our conscious and thinking system, which is rational, reflective, and helps us stay focused and in control. Kahnemann and Tversky⁹ were together building the foundation for discovering biases when developing their new prospect theory. They found out that the pain of loss is stronger than the joy of gain,

the hurt of losing a euro is greater than the pleasure of finding one, for example. This cognitive bias is known as “loss aversion”. Kahnemann won the 2002 Nobel Prize for his work on integrating psychological aspects into what were previously considered “rational” choices. Based on his notion of biases, the “homo economicus” lost ground in economics and the focus shifted to the fact that humans have the tendency to make so-called non-rational decisions which are influenced by things such as loss aversion, priming, their perception of the messenger of a message, and other influencing factors.

Yet the unconscious is more than biases, and biases cannot only be understood as negative and irrational; they are also a shortcut that enables our brain to arrive at decisions more quickly, which in many life situations can be quite helpful. This can be called, as many people would also think of the unconscious, “gut feeling”. Gigerenzer¹⁰ (2007) views the intelligence of the unconscious as a synonym for “gut feeling” in which quick and simple heuristics play a key role. Heuristics follow their own rationality, and instead of the term “gut feeling” one can speak of intuition as “affectively charged judgements that arise through rapid, non-conscious and holistic associations”.¹¹ Intuition is, although affectively charged, itself not emotional, yet it can be negatively impacted by feelings of fear, anxiety, pride of authorship, and wishful thinking.¹² Intuition helps with preparing a decision, by directing attention to external stimuli which only later will be categorised as opportunities or threats. “Affectively charged” here means, for example, that discomforting information can be rejected because it threatens self-esteem and self-identity, and can thus be connected with fear and anxiety.

However, the neurosciences have developed their insights much further than biases and heuristics. We will take a more detailed look at this in Chapter 4. For the time being, we understand that feeling, thinking, and acting are influenced by factors that lie beyond our conscious understanding of the world.

This means that in every action, in every thought and decision, and in all kinds of more or less conscious feelings, the unconscious plays a role—there is no thinking without feeling, as Damasio puts it,¹³ and there is no conscious reaction without the influence of the unconscious. We can imagine the effect of the unconscious as a big filter through which all external and internal (bodily) information flows (see Figure 1).

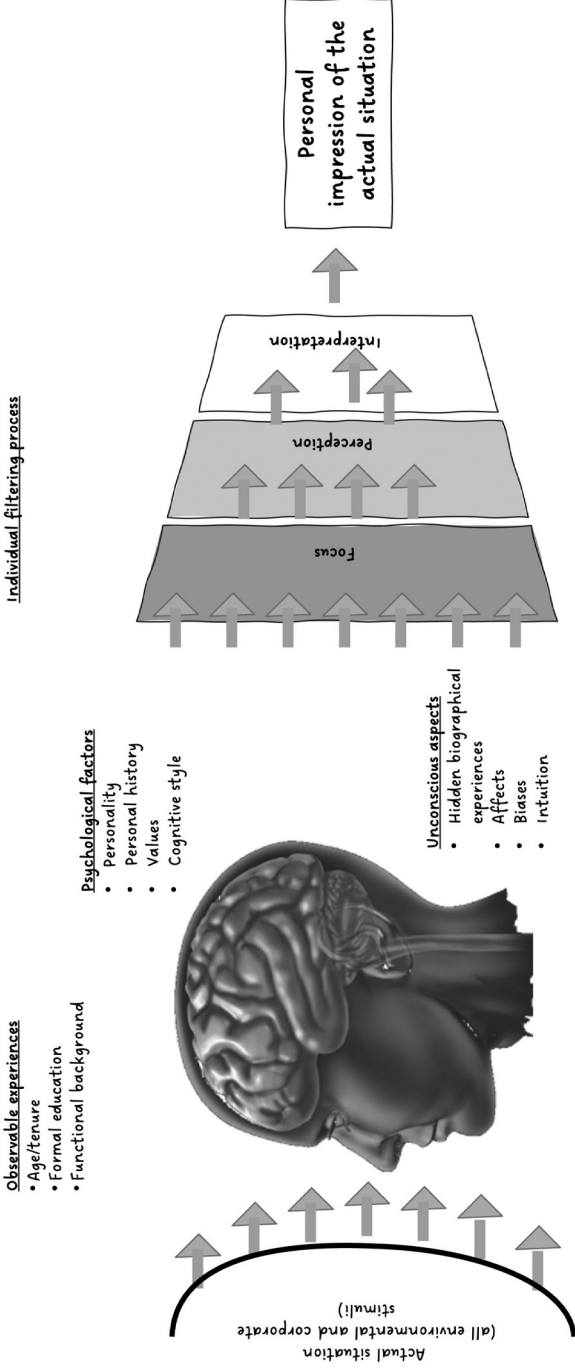


Figure 1: The leader's unconscious filtering system (author's image)

The best illustration of the unconscious and conscious was developed by Jonathan Haidt.¹⁴ He imagines the unconscious forces as an elephant, being ridden by a man that represents the conscious part. “I’m holding the reins in my hands, and by pulling one way or the other I can tell the elephant to turn, to stop, or to go. I can direct things, but only when the elephant doesn’t have desires of his own. When the elephant really wants to do something, I’m no match for him.”¹⁵

The rider wants to achieve something and of course wants to do it together with the elephant, but very often the elephant either does not do anything, runs in the opposite direction, or just sits still and eats. The elephant is not to be managed and controlled so easily, if at all. Over the next few chapters, we will explore the “elephant” to better understand how we can improve cooperation and influence other elephants and their riders.