


# **THE LEADER ON THE COUCH**

**A Clinical Approach to  
Changing People  
and Organizations**

**Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries**

 **JOSSEY-BASS**  
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To Alicia,  
A great bearer of transitional space

# PREFACE

There are . . . things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself, and every decent man has a number of such things stored away in his mind.

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

Becoming conscious is of course a sacrilege against nature; it is as though you had robbed the unconscious of something.

—Carl G. Jung

“Know thyself?” If I knew myself, I’d run away.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Man stands in his own shadow and wonders why it’s dark.

—Zen proverb

There’s a Zen story about a martial arts student who went to his teacher and said, “I have committed myself to master your martial system. How long will it take me to succeed?” The teacher’s response was, “Ten years.” Impatiently, the student countered, “But that’s far too slow. I want to succeed much sooner. I’ll work very hard. I’ll dedicate myself to practicing however many hours it takes each day. How long will mastery take when I make that kind of effort?” The teacher thought for a moment, and then replied, “Twenty years.”

Obviously, the teacher is trying to tell the student that he needs to learn patience before proceeding any further. He’s saying, Go slowly to go fast! Certain kinds of learning can’t be rushed; they have to be approached one step at a time.

This is particularly true of becoming more emotionally attuned. To acquire this kind of knowledge, there are two secrets. The first is to have patience; the second is to be patient! Acquiring higher emotional intelligence—that is, gaining a better understanding of the psychodynamics of human behavior—is never instantaneous. Becoming more psychologically minded requires not only time, but also persistence. Patience and persistence can move mountains. They are the keys to becoming more emotionally astute.

What differentiates the great companies of this world from the merely average ones is the level of emotional intelligence (EQ) among their employees. In our post-industrial knowledge-based society, companies populated with high-EQ personnel have the best shot at creativity and innovation. In such companies, statements like “People are our greatest asset” and “Our capital leaves the workplace every evening” are more than empty slogans; they are credos with real meaning. Executives who run such companies value their people and see them as much more than interchangeable commodities. Realizing that considerable corporate knowledge and wisdom reside in the gray matter of their employees, they view the selection, development, and retention of talent as a source of competitive advantage, they consider leadership development a core competence, and they make a valiant effort to keep their employees motivated.

I have devoted my working life to helping people create emotionally intelligent organizations. I have taken many different routes to make this dream a reality. As a management professor, consultant, leadership coach, psychotherapist, and psychoanalyst, I have had many corporate leaders “on the couch,” literally and figuratively. My in-depth interactions with these executives have given me a rare glimpse into the inner world of leaders, revealing

the interplay of personality and environment and unveiling the process of personal and organizational change.

In taking this road less traveled, I have noted a clear and compelling connection between the personal objectives of the organization's power holders and the objectives of the organization itself. The intrapsychic themes of the CEO often dictate the structure or priorities of the organization. This linkage comes about because we are what we think. In other words, all that we are arises with our thoughts; with our thoughts, we make our world. Perception carries so much weight that objectivity is nothing more than masked subjectivity. Thus many management theories that explain how people make decisions in organizations are inadequate oversimplifications. In fact, the apparently rational explanations for certain decisions often turn out to be fiction, rationalizations made after the fact to explain how intrapsychic themes were translated into external reality.

In my role as a management consultant to executive boards, I have often been quite successful at creating high-performance teams and high-performance organizations. When I began to work with executive boards, however, I discovered that many executive teams are what I call "unnatural acts." Though they come together to make serious decisions affecting the future of the organization and its people, they engage in ritualistic activities that center on political gamesmanship and posturing rather than substance. The "barons" of the various business entities—the heads of marketing and new-product development, for example—are so busy defending their respective fiefdoms that true conflict resolution doesn't occur. Other, more intangible factors seem to take over as executives circle around "undiscussables." While a six hundred pound gorilla sits on the table, smelling up the place, the senior executive group squanders an incredible amount of energy ignoring its presence. Far too often, it has to be "high noon" (or beyond)

before corporate leaders are prepared to deal with the real issues. In many instances, as an outside consultant, I have taken it upon myself to nudge an executive team to grapple with their own particular undiscussables. In taking on that role, I have come to understand the meaning of the saying, "Fish start to smell from the head."

As in my consultant work, in my role as an educator I have gone to great lengths to create more emotionally intelligent students. I have made this effort not only in working with MBAs but also in working with executives. The two transformational programs that I run at INSEAD, "The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders" and "Consulting and Coaching for Change," have been instrumental in accomplishing these goals. In particular, the top management program "The Challenge of Leadership" has been a great human "laboratory," encouraging and promoting mindset change among participants.

I have a dream as an educator dedicated to helping people engage in transformational journeys. This dream goes as follows: If I can increase the EQ level of the approximately twenty people who usually are enrolled in this program at any one time, perhaps I can have a positive effect on the 100,000 or more people for whom they are responsible. I would like to think that I can help make their organizations more effective and more humane. Too many organizations possess "gulag" qualities that prevent the human spirit from self-actualizing.

This book is a manifesto espousing my belief, and that of my colleagues at the INSEAD Global Leadership Center, in high-EQ organizations. It is a natural sequence to a previous book of mine: *The Leadership Mystique*. The difference is that this new book, in introducing the clinical approach to individual and organizational intervention, is more conceptual. It takes a much deeper look at personality



prototypes; it introduces a well-tried methodology to help executives change behavior patterns; it deals with leadership coaching; it concerns team building; and it explores system-wide change strategies in organizations.

Like *The Leadership Mystique*, *Leaders on the Couch* is a manifesto in favor of organizations where people are authentic and feel truly alive, where they understand what they're doing and why, and what the consequences will be. It's a manifesto arguing for more reflective, emotionally intelligent executives, and it offers valuable tools toward that end: for example, it gives executives a new lens through which to look at people and concepts—a lens that makes unusual behavior (in self and others) more understandable. Far too many executives engage in “manic” behavior, running and doing all the time, forgetting why they go to work each day. Uncertain what they want, they're nonetheless willing to kill themselves to get it. While it may be true that the really idle person doesn't get anywhere, the perpetually busy person has the same problem. My hope is that this book will be helpful to executives, consultants, and leadership coaches, teaching them to peel back the layers of self-deception to reveal how inner personality—largely hard-wired since early childhood—affects the way we lead and manage others.

For many years I have been intrigued by Zen stories. Actually, acquiring emotional intelligence and becoming a Zen master are learning processes that have many aspects in common. Both Zen and psychoanalysis are disciplines of attention, conferring on successful adherents a profound change in mindset. Both disciplines aim for self-discovery, self-understanding, and the possession of peace with oneself. Psychoanalysis explores the unconscious meanings, desires, and feelings of individuals with the goal of making them feel more creative and alive. The purpose of Zen is to make people fully aware of life as it's actually lived. Zen

deals with the capacity to awaken the mind and clarify consciousness. Just as psychological insights can be attained by everyone who makes the effort, Zen teaches that everyone can acquire the Buddha-nature; in other words, everyone has the potential to achieve spiritual enlightenment. Because of ignorance, however, most of us make too little use of this potential.

Disciples of Zen argue that people's innate capacity to become more insightful about themselves and the world around them is best awakened not just by the study of scriptures, the doing of good deeds, the practice of rites and ceremonies, and the worship of images, but also by a sudden breaking through of the boundaries of common, everyday, logical thought. People have to learn how to cope with paradoxical situations to arrive at a new understanding. To quote Pablo Picasso, "Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction." Thus the paradoxical statements—the riddles, if you will—embedded in koans (Zen stories inaccessible to rational understanding) help Zen disciples progress on the spiritual journey toward enlightenment. Many disciples find the journey more rewarding when undertaken with the help of a master. This method of assisted self-discovery is very similar to the dynamics of leadership coaching, psychoanalysis, or psychotherapy. In these methodologies, the psychoanalyst, psychotherapist, or leadership coach takes on the role of "master," offering spiritual guidance. Like the quest for greater EQ, the Zen form of enlightenment can't be forced; rather, it's a form of slow and silent illumination. And practitioners of Zen and psychoanalysis are never completely satisfied with the results of their approach. The journey is always indeterminate.

Tapping into the parallels between the process of acquiring emotional intelligence and the journey toward spiritual enlightenment, I have chosen to begin each of the

chapters of this book with a Zen story. Allow the paradox of each koan to help you discern the leadership message presented in each chapter. As you attempt to move toward increased self-awareness and emotional intelligence, this book will serve as your “master.”

Many of these chapters started as articles and working papers in which I explored the clinical orientation to organizational analysis. Many of the papers were first presented to executives taking the “Challenge of Leadership” seminar. This intensive executive program has been a good testing ground for my ideas. Many of the papers had their origin in knotty, paradoxical questions from executives to which I couldn’t give an immediate answer—questions that haunted me until I arrived at what seemed like plausible answers. These original papers have been reworked and integrated to help the reader better understand the advantages of using the clinical perspective for the purpose of organizational sense-making.

The main theme of this book, weaving through all the pages, is changing people and organizations. The text starts with an introduction describing the clinical approach to organizational analysis. The body of the book then follows, divided into three parts.

Part One (“Entering the Inner Theater of Leaders”) describes various personality prototypes that can be found in the workplace and focuses on personality functioning and its consequences in organizational life. To the extent that executives understand why people do what they do, how the shadow side of human behavior manifests itself at work, and how people with different personality styles relate to each other, they can foster creativity and cooperation among their colleagues and subordinates. The personality prototypes presented in Chapters 2 through 5—useful despite the generalizations that labeling relies on—are tools

to help readers become more astute in understanding and helping people. Chapter 6 looks at the contagiousness of emotion in the organizational setting, focusing on the issue of charismatic leadership in the context of the psychology of elation. Chapter 7 addresses the question of neurotic imposture—that is, feeling like a fake in the face of proven competence—a common response among executives.

Part Two (“Changing Mindsets”) focuses on the educational “technology” needed to change the mindset of executives. This section discusses methods of intervention that can lead to transformational change. Chapters 8 and 9 explore a highly effective leadership intervention technique that involves creating a safe, transitional space to foster new learning—creating what we might call a “learning community”—with a detailed example showing how such a change process can be successful. Chapter 10 deals with leadership coaching in general and discusses various leadership coaching techniques. Chapter 11 addresses group leadership coaching, a technique that has proved to be highly effective in making true change a reality in “natural” working groups or executive teams.

Part Three (“Understanding the Psychodynamics of Groups and Organizations”) deals with the question of system-wide clinical intervention in organizations. Chapter 12 places the psychology of small and large groups under the microscope, looking at group behavior, social defenses, the concept of the organizational ideal, and the “neurotic” (or dysfunctional) organization. The purpose of this chapter is to help the reader better understand the role of systemic organizational dysfunctionality. Chapter 13 presents a leadership/organizational “audit” and explores the possibility of clinical organizational interventions via a change agent or clinically informed organizational consultant. The final chapter (Chapter 14) explores the question of human authenticity, weighing the implications of

presenting a true versus a false self, and discusses the creation of authentic organizations, places of work where people feel alive and are called to give their best.

Why is it worth an executive's time to read about all these issues? Because people around the world complain that there's a great discrepancy between what their leaders say and what their leaders do, and that discrepancy is grounded in leaders' lack of awareness of their own psychological drivers and mood states—their “inner theater” (a subject that will be addressed in greater detail in the next chapter). That unawareness makes them prisoners of hidden forces that dictate their decisions and their behavior. Leaders and followers alike will continue to send mixed and confusing messages as long as they are unaware of the content of their inner theater.

Readers should be forewarned that uncovering these unconscious patterns can be uncomfortable, anxiety-provoking, and even disorienting. Going one step further and changing the script in one's inner theater is even more formidable. Those who are in situations of personal trauma are typically more willing than the complacent to unlock their inner theater, because the pain of not doing so appears to be worse than the pain of facing their inner truth. Thus preparedness for change differs by individual, with power often being the determining factor. People in positions of power are much more likely than their subordinates to find excuses not to engage in personal work that's emotionally painful. The fact that leaders can easily inflict their inadequacies on others, blaming them for lack of performance and poor communication, makes such an avoidance strategy even more likely. People lower in the power firmament have fewer opportunities to bestow blame; for them, scapegoating isn't an easy option.

The reluctance of leaders to take a hard look at themselves is supported by the societal myth that leadership is a rational endeavor. Unfortunately, this denial of psychological reality encourages leaders to go on sending mixed messages, practicing inappropriate behavior, and blaming external factors for their mistakes rather than taking personal responsibility. To be truly effective, leaders need to preserve a hold on reality; they need to see things as they really are, avoiding the intense pressure from subordinates to reside in a hall of mirrors. In some cases this means being willing to rely on professional support and expertise in uncovering psychological drivers and making the personal shifts necessary for leadership excellence. In all cases it means accepting that such a process takes time. But that time is well spent: raising one's personal awareness and learning how to make the most of strengths and minimize weaknesses is in fact an act of self-sacrifice, done not just for personal gratification but also for the good of one's co-workers and of the organization.

Despite the well-documented benefits to the organization of emotional intelligence, organizational life has typically been hostile to the inner world of feeling. So-called rational, objective thinking is supposed to be superior to mere feeling, which can "contaminate" our judgment so that we fail to act in a "rational" manner. But that's a very tenuous position. In point of fact, without feelings there are no actions. Without feelings there is no passion. Everything important to human beings is affect-ridden. The things important to us have emotional meaning to make us think about them. And that's the case in organizations as much as it is in our personal lives. Feelings stand central in organizational life and are expressed in many different forms.

What I'm doing here—exploring the role of emotion in personality, in decision-making, in the process of change,

and in group processes— isn't new. Many poets, novelists, and playwrights have done it before me. They were the early psychologists. Among the best was Shakespeare, who still today is a great teacher regarding the ways of the world and the foibles of leaders. In showing the shadow side of leaders' behavior, he's second to none: Macbeth, Richard III, and King Lear are great examples. On the heath King Lear asks Gloucester: "How do you see the world?" Gloucester, who is blind, answers: "I see it feelingly." My hope is that the men and women who run the world's organizations will do the same.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As people grow older, they sometimes discover that while they can enjoy life on their own, true appreciation of life requires companionship. Voltaire's comment, "By appreciation, we make excellence in others our own property," still has a ring of truth. Books aren't written in isolation. As has been said by many others before, authors stand on the shoulders of others. As the years go by, my memory of which people influenced my way of thinking in various areas has become hazier. I have so deeply internalized many ideas that the original contributors have been lost. Certain memories, however, have retained their clarity. Looking back into my past, I realize the extent to which my years at Harvard deeply affected me. That period still fills me with a sense of wonder at all the new experiences (cultural and otherwise) I was exposed to.

Four names from that period (1960s and 70s) stand out as influential in the development of my thinking. The first is Erik Erikson, the well-known psychoanalyst and teacher of human development. His lectures at Harvard College were like psychodramas, hugely exciting to me. He made me realize, through his studies of transformational leaders such as Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi, the importance of the interface of personality and historical moment. Another person who had a huge influence on me was C. Roland Christensen, a professor of business policy who contributed enormously to the quality of teaching at Harvard. Apart from the influence he has had on my teaching style, his humanity and wisdom still touch me. His sudden, untimely death has been hard to take, although he lives on in my inner world. My main mentor during those years at the Harvard Business



School was Abraham Zaleznik, professor of leadership. His influence on my way of looking at the world and at organizations has been enormous. My weekly dialogues with him taught me many things about the creative process. His seminars left me with a sense of wonder about the mysteries of the mind. The crossing of our paths very much determined my career choice, nebulous and precarious as it looked at the time. Last but certainly not least, Sudhir Kakar, listed in a recent issue of the *Nouvel Observateur* as the “psychoanalyst of the world,” helped to shape my perspective. Who would have thought, when we first met as young men in Abraham Zaleznik’s seminar, that our lives would intertwine as they have?

On a more contemporary note, I would like to thank my five program directors who work at the INSEAD Global Leadership Center: Elisabet Engellau (who is much more than a colleague), Roger Lehman, Jean-Claude Noel, Stanislav Shekshnia and Martine van den Poel. In addition, I like to express my appreciation to Konstantin Korotov, once my doctoral student and now a professor at the European School of Management and Technology (although still associated with INSEAD Global Leadership Center). Their initiative and creative thinking in making the Center the success it has become (often against all odds) is very much appreciated. It has been an incredible journey for me to learn from all of them and from the students who pass through our doors. I would also like to express my appreciation to Agatha Halczewska-Figuet, the Center’s executive director and to the Center’s staff, which keeps the “back office” running efficiently: Fabienne Chemin, Silke Bequet and Nadine Theallier.

During the past year I have learned the hard way that trying to both write and run the Center is extremely difficult. Therefore, the buffering roles played by my research project manager, Elizabeth Florent-Treacy, and my assistant, Sheila

Loxham, have been doubly appreciated. Their heroic efforts have helped keep the random variable that I am, on track. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my two editors, Sally Simmons and Kathy Reigstad, for their skill in making the unreadable readable. My appreciation for these two magicians, who practice their craft not only on words but also on logic, is hard to put into words.

Carl Jung once said that “one looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.” How true! In this context, I want to thank my students, who have been willing to experiment in telling their stories, and in doing so, touched the listener.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries brings a different view to the muchstudied subjects of leadership and the dynamics of individual and organizational change. Applying his knowledge and experience of economics (Econ. Drs., University of Amsterdam), management (ITP, MBA, and DBA, Harvard Business School), and psychoanalysis (member of the Canadian Psychoanalytic Society and the International Psychoanalytic Association), Kets de Vries scrutinizes the interface between international management, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and dynamic psychiatry. His specific areas of interest are leadership, career dynamics, executive stress, entrepreneurship, family business, succession planning, cross-cultural management, teambuilding, coaching, and the dynamics of corporate transformation and change.

A clinical professor of leadership development, he holds the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chair of Leadership Development at INSEAD, France and Singapore, and is director of INSEAD's Global Leadership Center. In addition, he is program director of INSEAD's top-management seminar, "The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders" and scientific director of the program "Consulting and Coaching for Change." In addition to having received the International Leadership Association's prestigious annual leadership scholar award for his "contribution to the classroom and the boardroom," he has also five times received INSEAD's distinguished teacher award. He has also held professorships at McGill University, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales (Montreal), and the Harvard Business School, and he has lectured at management

institutions around the world. He is a founding member of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations. The Financial Times, Le Capital, Wirtschaftswoche, and The Economist have judged Manfred Kets de Vries among the world's top 50 management thinkers and among the top 100 most influential people in human resource management.

Kets de Vries is the author, coauthor, or editor of more than twenty books, including *Power and the Corporate Mind* (1975, new edition 1985, with Abraham Zaleznik), *Organizational Paradoxes: Clinical Approaches to Management* (1980, new edition 1994), *The Irrational Executive: Psychoanalytic Explorations in Management* (1984, editor), *The Neurotic Organization: Diagnosing and Changing Counterproductive Styles of Management* (1984, new edition 1990, with Danny Miller), *Unstable at the Top* (1988, with Danny Miller), *Prisoners of Leadership* (1989), *Handbook of Character Studies* (1991, with Sidney Perzow), *Organizations on the Couch* (1991), *Leaders, Fools and Impostors* (1993), the prize-winning *Life and Death in the Executive Fast Lane: Essays on Organizations and Leadership* (1995, the Critics' Choice Award 1995-96), *Family Business: Human Dilemmas in the Family Firm* (1996), *The New Global Leaders: Percy Barnevik, Richard Branson, and David Simon* (1999, with Elizabeth Florent-Treacy), *Struggling with the Demon: Perspectives on Individual and Organizational Irrationality* (2001), *The Leadership Mystique* (2001, new edition 2006), *The Happiness Equation* (2002), *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory* (2003), *The New Russian Business Leaders* (2004), *Are Leaders Born or Are They Made? The Case of Alexander the Great* (2004) and *Lessons on Leadership by Terror: Finding Shaka Zulu in the Attic* (2004). He has also developed a number of multi-rater feedback instruments: *Global Executive Leadership Inventory* (2005),

*The Personality Audit* (in press) and *The Leadership Archetype Questionnaire*.

In addition, Kets de Vries has published over 250 scientific papers as chapters in books and as articles in such journals as Behavioral Science, Journal of Management Studies, Human Relations, Administration & Society, Organizational Dynamics, Strategic Management Journal, Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Journal of Forecasting, California Management Review, Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, Academy of Management Executive, Psychoanalytic Review, Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic, Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, European Management Journal, International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management, Harper's, and Psychology Today. He has also written over 150 case studies, including eight that received the Best Case of the Year award. He is a regular writer for a number of magazines. His work has been featured in such publications as the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times, Fortune, Business Week, the Economist, the Financial Times, and the International Herald Tribune. His books and articles have been translated into over twenty-five languages. He is a member of seventeen editorial boards. He is one of the few Europeans who have been elected a Fellow of the Academy of Management.

Kets de Vries is a consultant on organizational design/transformation and strategic human resource management to leading US, Canadian, European, African, and Asian companies. As a global consultant in executive development, he has worked with clients such as ABB, Aegon, Air Liquide, Alcan, Alcatel, Accenture, Bain Consulting, Bang & Olufsen, Bonnier, BP, Ericsson, GE Capital, Goldman Sachs, HypoVereinsbank, Investec, KPMG, Lego, Lufthansa, Lundbeck, McKinsey, Novartis, Nokia, Novo-Nordisk, Rank Xerox, Shell, SHV, SABMiller, Standard

Bank of South Africa, Unilever, and Volvo Car Corporation. As an educator and consultant, he has worked in more than forty countries.

The Dutch government made Kets de Vries an officer in the Order of Oranje Nassau in 1997. He was the first fly fisherman in Outer Mongolia and is a member of New York's Explorers Club. In his spare time he can be found in the rainforests or savannas of Central Africa, in the Siberian taiga, in the Pamir mountains, in Arnhemland or within the Arctic Circle.