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MANFRED F. R. KETS DE VRIES

# THE DAILY **PERILS** OF EXECUTIVE LIFE

HOW TO SURVIVE  
WHEN DANCING ON  
QUICKSAND



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# The Daily Perils of Executive Life

How to Survive When Dancing  
on Quicksand

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Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries  
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# Preface

*I think we consider too much the good luck of the early bird and not enough the bad luck of the early worm.* (Franklin D. Roosevelt)

*A great man's greatest good luck is to die at the right time.* (Erik Hoffer)

Recently, I was reminded the role the inconceivable plays in our lives. In early 2020 I delivered the first module of my long-running seminar for C-suite executives at INSEAD. Afterward, I told myself that it was the most effective module I could remember. But I'm given to pessimism, so almost immediately I found myself thinking, well, this can't last. It's all gone too seamlessly. There haven't been any hiccups. Something's bound to go wrong in the next module. And as the whole world learned soon enough, things went very wrong. There was no next module. If someone had told me that I would have to stop the workshop due to a pandemic, I would have rolled my eyes in disbelief. The idea would have been beyond even my deepest pessimism. Who would have thought that an incident supposedly taken place at a wet market in Wuhan would become the catalyst for a global pandemic? Reality can change its hue like a chameleon.

I should have known better. I have lived long enough to know that life's dice rolls in mysterious and random ways. The unimaginable is never far away and tragedy is always just round the corner. I remembered what happened to the Greek playwright Aeschylus, the father of dramatic tragedy. Legend has it that his personal ending was determined by the tragic convergence of three moveable objects: Aeschylus himself, a turtle, and a lammergeier, the bird also known as a bearded vulture.

Imagine a turtle. On this special day it wakes up hungry, as it does every morning, and crawls slowly toward some fresh green shoots. Unfortunately, its movements catch the eye of a lammergeier soaring high in the skies, also looking for breakfast; the bird sweeps down and grabs the reptile. But what now? As turtles do, it has withdrawn into its shell, making it difficult for the vulture to get at anything edible. But lammergeiers are no fools. The bird knows what to do next. Another of its names is ossifrage, or bone breaker. To be able to reach the marrow inside the large bones these vultures usually scavenge, they drop them from a great height, then glide down to inspect the results. They do this again and again until the bone is sufficiently cracked. Of course, this vulture did the same thing with the turtle. It dropped it, but instead of landing on a rock, the turtle landed on the skull of Aeschylus. According to this apocryphal story, the playwright spent most of his time outdoors. Ever since a prophecy had foretold that he would be killed by a falling object he had avoided manmade structures. What a tragic and absurd ending for the originator of tragedy. Fact can stretch our credulity even further than fiction.

But why a turtle? I am a psychoanalyst and in the habit of thinking about symbolism. Turtle symbolism is prevalent in many cultures. Often, the turtle symbolizes groundedness in moments of great disturbances and chaos. Turtles are closely tied to the earth—after all, they carry their home on their back—and move purposefully. They are symbols of stability, determination, endurance, wisdom, and long life. Anyway, as chance would have it, I found a turtle in my garden while self-isolating from the virus in the south of France. Where it came from still puzzles me although I'm sure it didn't fall from the sky. It appeared mysteriously and disappeared equally mysteriously. I hardly conjured it up but my interests in Aeschylus, turtles, and the pandemic are clearly tied together. It felt like joining the dots.

In a way we have all had a metaphorical turtle drop on to our head out of thin air, changing our lives dramatically. The pandemic came from nowhere and has been a rude awakening for all of us. It has showed us how fragile our planet is and how interconnected we are as human beings. The boundaries between our own problems and those of others have been largely erased. As the pandemic has forced us to change our behavior patterns, it has become a gigantic social experiment. We have all been moved out of our comfort zones and forced to change the way we deal with our lives. The cost of the pandemic has been terrible; as well as illness, it has been a time of mourning, with grief sharpened by survivors' separation from their loved ones when they died.

Like everyone else, the time since spring 2020 has been very strange for me. Like the turtle I found in my garden, I have single-mindedly pursued my



personal antidote to the stress of confinement and focused on writing—a lot. This book is a collection of essays that are my personal attempts at sense-making. They reflect my concerns about the state of the world and many first saw the light of day serendipitously. Often, what I wrote was my reaction to current events, or responses to questions asked during the many podcasts and Zoom conferences in which I took part during lockdown.

I have divided this book into three sections. In the first section—Managing Self—I take a micro-perspective, reflecting on issues that we encounter in day-to-day living. The second section of the book—Leadership—takes more of an organizational perspective, while in the final section—Society—I look at larger social issues.

Writing entails periods of enforced solitude. It tends to be an introspective, contemplative activity, even approaching an altered state of consciousness. By its very nature, writing is an encounter with your personal muse—an exploratory journey into the unknown frontiers of your self. In fact, when you're alone with yourself for extended periods of time, trying to write down your thoughts, you learn a lot about yourself. Therefore, writing can be transformational.

To me, writing is a form of refined thinking in that it forces me to turn my thoughts inward, to discover things within myself and in the world around me, things I otherwise wouldn't have noticed. And I know that how I think and create my inner world affects what I become in my outer world. Writing has always helped me understand what really matters to me. Often, I don't really know what I think about something until I read what I have written about it. In other words, writing has always helped me to own my own story. In that respect, in the context of my long educational journey to becoming a psychoanalyst, writing is a continuation of my therapeutic training.

Furthermore, writing has always been my way of exploring what I don't know, or to be more precise, what I don't know yet but would like to know. It has helped me to explore, uncover and investigate the mysteries of human nature. I have come to realize that taking such a journey isn't effortless but at the same time, I know that I write because it is difficult. Often, leaving my comfort zone can be gut-wrenching. It impacts otherwise unexplored parts of my brain. In that respect, writing shapes character, making me appreciate the things that are worth doing.

Another motivation to write comes from my urge to share my words, thoughts, and passions with the world. I'm aware that this might sound rather narcissistic, but my fantasy has always been that if something matters to me, who knows, it may also matter to other people. And I persist in doing so, because I believe strongly that all of us should engage in things that are bigger



than ourselves. The mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote, “When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness.” In that respect, writing is the concretization of my ideas; it gives my ideas substance and allows them to travel. And I hope, through the spread of these ideas, that I might effect change, for the better. As I have discovered for myself, reading what people have written can change lives. After all, if we don’t change, we don’t grow. And if we don’t grow, we aren’t really living.

Anyone who has tried to write knows that writing can be an extremely lonely affair. Fortunately, my efforts at writing don’t take place in a complete vacuum. There are several people I have always been able to lean on. I am very grateful to David Champion, senior editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, who has always been extremely encouraging in helping me turn my ideas into reality. In particular, he has always pushed me to reflect on recommendations for action when writing for the *Review*, something that doesn’t always come easily as many of the problems I deal with professionally don’t lend themselves to straightforward answers. I also want to thank Isabelle Laporte, senior editor of *INSEAD Knowledge*, for her encouraging positivity. Isabelle taught me how to restructure my texts more succinctly. In particular, I am also extremely grateful for the editorial help of my long-time editor, Sally Simmons, a real editor’s editor. The many books I have written would never have seen the light of day without her input. In addition, my collaborator, Alicia Cheak-Baillargeon, has always been remarkable for her speed in responding to my editorial queries. Of course, there is also my cheerleader, Elisabet Engellau, always prepared, in her very subtle way, to give me constructive feedback.

Paris, France

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

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## About the Author

**Manfred Florian Kets de Vries** brings a different view to the much-studied subjects of leadership and the psychological dimensions of individual and organizational change. Bringing to bear his knowledge and experience of economics (Econ. Drs., University of Amsterdam), management (ITP, MBA, and DBA, Harvard Business School), and psychoanalysis (Membership Canadian Psychoanalytic Society, Paris Psychoanalytic Society, and the International Psychoanalytic Association), he explores the interface between management science, psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, psychotherapy, executive coaching, and consulting. His specific areas of interest are leadership (the “bright” and “dark” side), entrepreneurship, career dynamics, talent management, family business, cross-cultural management, succession planning, organizational and individual stress, C-suite team building, executive coaching, organizational development, transformation management, and management consulting.

The Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development and Organizational Change at INSEAD, he is Program Director of INSEAD’s top management program, “The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders,” and the Founder of INSEAD’s Executive Master Program in Change Management. As an educator, he has received INSEAD’s distinguished teacher award six times. He has held professorships at McGill University; the École des Hautes Études Commerciales, Montreal; the European School for Management and Technology (ESMT), Berlin; and the Harvard Business School. He has lectured at management institutions around the world. *The Financial Times*, *Le Capital*, *Wirtschaftswoche*, and *The Economist* have rated Manfred Kets de Vries among the world’s leading management thinkers and among the most influential contributors to human resource management.

Kets de Vries is the author, co-author, or editor of more than fifty books, including *The Neurotic Organization*, *Leaders, Fools and Impostors*, *Life and Death in the Executive Fast Lane*, *The Leadership Mystique*, *The Happiness Equation*, *Are Leaders Born or Are They Made? The Case of Alexander the Great*, *The New Russian Business Elite*, *Lessons on Leadership by Terror: Finding Shaka Zulu in the Attic*, *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory*, *The Leader on the Couch*, *Coach and Couch*, *Family Business on the Couch*, *Sex, Money, Happiness, and Death: The Quest for Authenticity*, *Reflections on Character and Leadership*, *Reflections on Leadership and Career Development*, *Reflections on Groups and Organizations*, *The Coaching Kaleidoscope*, *The Hedgehog Effect: The Secrets of Building High Performance Teams*, *Mindful Leadership Coaching: Journeys into the Interior*, *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges*, *Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organization Lives Happily Ever After*, *Riding the Leadership Roller Coaster: An Observer's Guide*, *Down the Rabbit Hole of Leadership: Leadership Pathology in Everyday Life*, *Journeys into Coronavirus Land: Lessons from a Pandemic*, *The CEO Whisperer: Meditations on Leadership, Life and Change*, *Quo Vadis?: The Existential Challenges of Leaders*, *Leadership Unhinged: Essays on the Ugly, the Bad, and the Weird*, and *Leading Wisely: Becoming a Reflective Leader in Turbulent Times*.

In addition, Kets de Vries has published more than four hundred academic papers as chapters in books and as articles. He has also written more than a hundred case studies, including seven that received the Best Case of the Year award. He is a regular writer for various magazines. Furthermore, 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 Harvard Business Review*. His books and articles have been translated into more than thirty languages. He has written more than a hundred blogs (mini articles) for the *Harvard Business Review* and *INSEAD Knowledge*. He is a member of seventeen editorial boards and is a Fellow of the Academy of Management. He is also a founding member of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO), which has honored him as a lifetime member. Kets de Vries is also the first non-US recipient of International Leadership Association Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to leadership research and development (being considered one of the world's founding professionals in the development of leadership as a field and discipline). In addition, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Germany for his advancement of executive education. The American Psychological Association has honored him with the "Harry and Miriam Levinson Award" for his contributions to Organizational Consultation. Furthermore, he is the recipient of the "Freud Memorial