



Leaders Don't Command

Inspire Growth, Ingenuity, and Collaboration

Jorge Cuervo

Translated from the Spanish edition by Sergio Domínguez

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Foreword

In times of crisis like those we have seen recently, leadership—or the lack thereof—often serves as an easy target to offload people’s frustrations about who is responsible for the situation. Among the usual suspects are politicians, business owners, and managers. Discussions on the topic show that leadership is a multifaceted and complex social phenomenon that supports multiple approaches. In these circumstances it is always a good idea for someone to make the effort to bring some common sense to the discussion. It is important to break down and update existing opinions on the topic and provide some practical suggestions for those who want to improve their own leadership skills.

This book by Jorge Cuervo does just that, cleverly exploiting a combination of the author’s own experiences as an executive, trainer, and coach, and showing an undeniable talent for translating that experience into an easy and enjoyable read.

Reading the book has made me reflect on what we teach about leadership and how we can learn from and improve upon it. I will focus on two issues that I consider to be particularly significant: the role of influence and the importance of introspection in the development of leadership skills.

Gary Yukl, one of the foremost leadership scholars, has counted more than 1,500 different definitions of the term *leadership*. Despite this enormous diversity of meanings, many of them have some common characteristics: Leadership is a type of relationship that has to do with influencing others in

the service of a project or common objective. Influence, then, is a key element in leadership, but it is too often viewed as something external. It is often seen as a quality of the relationship between the one exercising leadership and those to whom it is addressed. To understand the effectiveness of this type of relationship it is more important to focus on the internal effects that it has on different people.

A great ESADE Business School professor and an old friend, Paco Vilahur has pointed out in his lectures that “to influence” means to cause fluidity or flow—to stir something inside people to get to an answer that appeals to the rational and emotional dimensions of the human mind. Now, you can obviously either bring out the best in people or awaken the worst of their demons. Seeing this distinction allows us to recognize the difference between good and bad leadership.

We should be wary of managers who deny their desire to influence others because that is the essence of leadership. They tend to be people who believe in the ability to dissociate the rational from the emotional. They believe in checking their baggage at the door. Based on discoveries in the field of neuroscience in the past two decades, Cuervo reminds us that this is biologically impossible. Managers may also be people who ascribe a negative connotation to influence, likening it to manipulation. This attitude is partially responsible for people’s negative perception of the word *leadership*, which is fueled by too many disgraceful examples where the ability to influence has been used to serve spurious and transparent interests.

Indeed, the line between influence and manipulation—which can be very thin—becomes clear when we ask ourselves about the intentions and underlying values. Here we find the freedom to accept or reject an idea, or to adhere to the project or not.

Despite all the criticism, companies and individual managers continue to invest millions of dollars a year in leadership development. Receiving an adequate return on this investment is a major challenge, and means walking

a path fraught with obstacles that are rooted in widespread ideas and beliefs. Cuervo refutes some of these beliefs and proposes many tools to pave the way.

One such idea is to look within yourself. In a celebrated article, Kay Peters highlighted the four stages that lead to maturity in management development: learning management techniques, understanding the strategy, exercising leadership, and self-discovery, including a sense that one's own actions are in the service of others. The message here, with an air of classicism, becomes "the improvement of leadership based on the improvement of self-leadership."

This call for introspection, also reflected in Richard Boyatzis's intentional change model, which Cuervo recognizes as a source of inspiration, is a call for executives to invest some of their invaluable time for thinking about themselves—to catch their breath, reorient, and reprioritize. Paradoxically, this self-reflective retreat creates the conditions for the reconstruction of a more open and selfless leadership model. As Cuervo points out, taking inspiration from Rafael Echeverria, one way to understand leadership is to think of it as a group quality and survival tool, from a sense of freedom of action that provides full awareness of the temporary situation and the privilege that playing the role of leader signifies.

In these times of crisis, Joseph Badaracco's advice takes on renewed importance. He proposed that we benefit more from the combined work of many hardworking and discreet leaders than a few heroic and singular acts of leadership. Cuervo's book is a good tool for those leaders who seek continuous improvement in the performance of their complex responsibilities.

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Preface

I started to write this book with what seemed like a clear objective: to connect current leadership theory with my own professional experience in a way that provided a map to help aspiring leaders face personal and professional challenges.

In short, I set out to write something that readers would find useful.

This process is the result of my own personal evolution, one that quickly uncovered a problem: Too many years of writing reports, memos, and briefings leave a mark. Accept it, Jorge. You are a boring writer.

I was afraid people wouldn't even make it past page four. Four? Really? Nope! Not even page two!

I felt the cortisol gushing through my veins with the fear of a blank page. The ideas that flowed freely in speech now rattled around in my head chaotically, full of dynamically complex interconnections and consequences. I couldn't make sense of it all in a way that someone else could understand. I would fail.

Even my plump little ego, which thus far had given me the strength to go through this challenge, now grew thin and started to work against me: "Give it up. Don't risk the embarrassment." I called a meeting of all of my "inner Jorges" and asked them for help. This is my team:

- **Jorge number one** is the tech. He is rational, methodical, and academic. He needs order and proof for everything. Solid and boring, he doesn't worry much about good impressions. He has

a degree in pharmaceutical sciences and an MBA. Life quickly put him on the back burner. In my head, he wears a white lab coat.

- **Jorge number two** arose when the former proved himself boring. He picked up the baton and took control. He's the aggressive executive: ambitious, dominant, and resourceful. He enjoys achievement and the thrill of a challenge. He wants results and won't tolerate nonsense. His dream is to be the general manager of something big. He has an enormous and wild ego. He loves expensive suits and is not averse to a good tie (clearly, there are preppy tendencies). Some value him while others can't stand his arrogance, but we should be understanding. Deep down he has an enormous need for acceptance and acknowledgment. A lot of his strength comes from those vulnerabilities, and he sees his job as a way of overcoming them. He's not a bad guy, just a little overwhelming. I try to space out his appearances because empathy isn't his strong suit.
- **Jorge number three** is the consultant. He's a lot like Jorge number two only more sensible and a better listener. He's also a bit like Jorge number one in his analytical and scientific spirit. He lives in the same world as Jorge number two, but moves through it more slowly. He's more of an observer than a man of action. He sees things from the outside and is less ambitious. He wears a suit and tie, but adds an informal touch to his ensemble. He struggles to stay in control under pressure from Jorge number two, who shows up like a whirlwind. Jorge number three has found that at its core, his job is to answer three questions:
 - Why don't people do what they're told?
 - Why don't people do what they say they'll do?
 - Why don't people do what's best for them?

Answering them is only half the solution. The other half is another story. In any case, he's found that he is interested in people, and wants to help them but doesn't know how. What he has learned about organizational management makes a lot of

sense, but in practice things always get complicated and turn out differently than he expected. Jorge number three seems constantly puzzled and gets the feeling that there's something beneath the organization that escapes him.

- **Jorge number four** is the professor. He was born a bit out of necessity and is connected with something deeply rooted in my nature. He likes to see how people can grow and is driven by the occasional sense of gratitude he gets from them. Training people gives my life meaning and Jorge number four is the incarnation of that. However, I didn't know any of this when he showed up. It was a complete surprise.

Jorge number four is simpler than the previous iterations. He wants to connect with his students from his being, not his ego. He really likes what he does even though it's often exhausting. Jorge number four dresses casually and adapts well to his surroundings, depending on the battlefield. He likes feisty audiences and enjoys surprising people. He's a bit of a provocateur. What really gets him going deep down, more than dispensing knowledge, is awakening a desire to learn in his students. He's fine with being a doorman (opening doors for people): Some will walk through them and others won't.

Jorge number four is always amazed at how little humans learn, how much effort it takes us, and how much we can do with the little bits we get! Since coming to this realization, Jorge number four tells his students to be on their toes so that those few things that they learn are truly relevant to their lives.

- **Jorge number five**, the coach, was the last one to show up. He is the result of the collaboration between Jorge number three and Jorge number four to find ways to help bring about change in people. He's happy coaching, but he isn't a fundamentalist—if one day he finds a method that's more effective, he will gladly incorporate it into his repertoire and unlearn whatever he needs to. Jorge number five is the perpetual student, the one who truly loves to learn. Still, he is not free from occasionally having to fight off his ego.

Lately, he works more and more with Jorge number four in his courses. They get along well, are happy with their results, and make a good team. They aren't sure how far this collaboration will go but are willing to give it a shot.

This is the team I recruited to write these pages. They are fighters who aren't afraid to roll up their sleeves! They don't always agree, but people say that a spirited debate is healthy, right? I guess we'll see. In any event, you hold the result in your hands and it is you who will determine its success.

But what's that? Someone else approaches? Will there be a Jorge number six?

Introduction

Executive leadership quality can explain as much as
45 percent of an organization's performance.

—Day and Lord (1988)

“Companies do not get the most out of their people” (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod 2001). When executives were asked if their companies developed their people well, only 3 percent responded positively!

Something is up. If you're a manager or business owner, you know full well that your job has become an extremely high-risk activity, as much a risk to your professional career as your health. This was not always the case. But today the first decision a manager has to face is “can I apply my previous experience here? And, if so, to what extent?” Managers are fighting the greatest dose of uncertainty in history and so are their teams.

From Hominid to Man

The root of this problem stretches back to millions of years ago when an adventurous primate descended from a tree in the African bush and began the journey of man. Our ancestors may seem, at first glance, to have been rather defenseless in that environment without powerful jaws or sharp claws.

Their chances for survival seemed grim. But they overcame their obstacles and we are the product of their success! Although I sometimes look around me and am overcome by doubt.

They survived because they developed three key skills: the ingenuity to find creative solutions, the power to act as a group, and, above all, the will to survive at all costs. And each of those skills resided in their brain. We are who we are today because of a survival-oriented brain. That is its function, its *raison d'être*, not the pursuit of truth or achievement of happiness. Yes, we can use it for that, too, but our brain was not sculpted by evolution for those ends. If we want to use it for that purpose we will have to learn to reprogram it, because we did not come factory-equipped with the necessary software. We have to develop it.

In short, our brain is a tool that is both powerful and fragile, one that we barely know how to adequately manage to meet the challenges of our times. In the past it has allowed us to extend our lifespan, as well as create a world so full of uncertainty and change that it is testing the limits of our own ability to adapt to it.

The same brain that once commanded a hoard of tribal warriors is now in charge of a nuclear fleet—or a bank!

That explains a lot, right? Spectacular advances in neuroscience highlight the limitations of our very nature to successfully confront the world we've created, at times with more ambition than conscience. Authors such as Antonio Damasio, recipient of the Prince of Asturias Award for Technical and Scientific Research in 2005, have torn down some of the basic paradigms that much of our thinking is built on. For example, the classical definition of the human being has changed from that of a rational being to a “being that rationalizes over an emotional base.”

Reason and Emotion

Today we know that it is not possible to make decisions and carry them out without emotion. In fact, it is the root of our success as a species. Understand success in the strictest biological sense as the ability to proliferate. For the most part, the discoveries that have changed our perception of human potential were produced during the first decade of the 21st century, although they have yet to make it into the management of organizations in any significant way. We continue going about projects as we always have: an authority develops an allegedly rational plan that came from a small number of brains, which is then implanted into the organization.

Don't we realize that the concept of implantation implies violence? It is surgical, metallic, and applied by force. The missing piece of this puzzle—which some may even call the victim—is the individual, the one responsible for making our plan work! Isn't that where the floodwaters that capsize our projects come from? The current organizational environment is the most complex it has ever been; we must apply new understanding to it so that we can turn the way we manage organizations around.

Some things have no name in accounting. And we all know that which has no name does not exist. We have a place in our ledgers for personnel costs but not lack of motivation, lack of incentive, debilitating routines, or lost opportunities. These costs do exist. They are real but they are camouflaged elsewhere and because of that are never incorporated into the organization's executive consciousness. You manage what you know. What you don't know manages you!

In a time of accelerated change—one that is simultaneously fascinating and stressful—in which paradigms are constantly being revised, traditional safety nets guarantee nothing. Today, organizational survival depends on successfully managing three factors:

- innovation and creativity
- flexibility in the face of change
- client relationships.

Whether you are innovating, actively adapting, or properly caring for your clients, every member of the organization, including those who do not participate directly in these areas, must go beyond simply doing their jobs. They must want to do them. And if they enjoy doing them, all the better. That “wanting to do things” is what we call attitude. Without it there is no commitment. Without commitment there are no positive results. That “wanting to do things” attitude is the key to the survival of the company: Whether we are ready to see it or not, the difference between the life and death of the organization is marked increasingly by the human factor, and not by viewing humans as resources. That is why the times we live in are so harsh to our management style!

Today’s managers are not worse than those of the past, but it sure feels like we are. We face a completely new environment—one that is much more demanding—and we are armed with concepts and tools from the 20th century, maybe even the 19th century. Complexity makes uncertainty permeate all situations in life, and traditional parameters that up until now have defined a good manager are proving insufficient.

An environment filled with this much uncertainty demands a leadership style that will inspire, encourage, and develop attitudes in teams that equip them to confront it. We will see that this is exactly the same as saying more and better leadership.

Acting like a leader today is much more necessary and difficult, requiring more commitment than in any other time in recorded history. It is not enough to get our teams to put their hands to work. We also need them to include their hearts and minds. And the difficulties that our teams experience in this environment have to be overcome first.

Managers Are Not Always Leaders

Without a doubt, these days being a manager does not automatically mean being a leader. That should be the case, of course. Leadership should permeate the entire management function, but this requires personal dedication and specific and constant training by the people in that role. These complex times that we live in, which are a result of rapid change, demand better people management skills, starting with those who manage others.

Those of us who have years of team management and consulting experience can attest that people tend to use only a fraction of their potential at work. For instance, I remember a series of change management workshops that we ran in a multinational company with a good reputation in the technology sector. The exercise required several different groups to design a change management project that met a set of predefined parameters. The groups that consisted of unspecialized workers came up with proposals of the same high quality as those in groups that included managers, even though the unspecialized workers used less technical language. The hardest part for us was convincing them that they were capable of doing it. They at first refused to even try, frustrated by years of discouragement, and were surprised by the results. Some were even upset and claimed that they would have preferred not to have found out! By the end of the workshop, we concluded that they needed quality leadership that would make them believe in their own abilities.

Managing talent is the key competitive factor. We go to great lengths to find and keep it. And yet there are untapped wells of squandered talent in the very same companies that are desperately looking for it outside. Do we think talent does not exist because we do not know how to extract it?

In order to do that, we have to know and develop our understanding of how we operate—starting with ourselves. We can then mobilize those three

levers that have been the key to the survival of our species: the capacity for ingenuity, teamwork, and the will to survive. These keys are also the basis for success in business.

Studies are constantly being published that tie leadership to organizational results and the market even offers methodological tools to evaluate the quality of that leadership. It has been proven that leadership development makes the difference by accomplishing several goals, including mobilizing existing knowledge in different levels of the organization, involving people and increasing their commitment, fostering follow-through and communication, and managing resistance to change by transforming it into initiative and creativity. OK, that sounds great! But how do you do it?

There are a lot of ways to do it, and they all follow the same paradigm shift: Move from “get people to do” to “get people to want to do.” And, as we have seen, the art of “getting people to want” has a name: leadership. The book that you have in your hands was written with the aim of helping you create and follow your own path as a leader.

Our challenge as managers is to awaken and mobilize our capacity for leadership so that we can cultivate that true well of competitive advantage. For many companies, this will mean modifying corporate culture and, above all, overcoming our traditional tendency toward more authoritative management styles. We will have to learn and unlearn. We will become more competitive and—in all probability—also better people.

Yes, it is a difficult road that we set out on because it also takes us deeper within ourselves. But the stakes are worth the effort and the rewards are gigantic. Not only will we bring our teams to succeed in the complex environments that we find ourselves in today, ones fraught with uncertainty, but we will also go through the rewarding process of professional and personal growth.

How to Use This Book

As I explained earlier, the objective of this work is to help readers construct their own map to navigate the foggy world of leadership and, thus, get maximum practical use. To that end, my first recommendation is to start by following the central pillars—start from the beginning. This book is broken down into three distinct parts. Part I shows the essence of leadership and the emotional processes that influence it. Thus it is essential to the meaning of the following two parts.

However, from that moment on, even though the book has a logical structure, you can follow any order you please. The relationship between leadership and logical reason is indirect. And sometimes we need to delve deeper into a certain topic that at that moment seems pressing to us. For this reason, the chapters in Parts II and III are written in a way that, while fitting in a natural order, will also hold up as independent sections.

Part II, *Ideas That Do Not Help*, looks to dismantle a series of beliefs and stereotypes that hold a lot of weight in our world, but often lack real meaning and hinder the development of leadership. Part III contains what I call leadership tools, and answers the question, “What can I do to improve my own leadership skills?”

In the beginning of this section I used the word *map* deliberately: Experience has taught me that leadership is not a place suited for cookbooks. The same recipe applied to different people and different circumstances will no doubt yield different results. So my second recommendation—and the most important one—is that rather than learning new skills, you must make them your own. Experiment and find yourself in the process. I suggest that you read this book with an explorer’s spirit, one that goes into unknown territory to discover its secrets and who, not just focusing on the goal, also enjoys the adventure. So grab your safari hat and go!

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