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Everyone Can Lead

Frans van de Ven | *Personal Leadership
in Organisations*

**Lannoo
Campus**



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ENSŌ

The symbol on the cover of this book is an *ensō*. *Ensō* is the Japanese word for 'circle'. Drawing the *ensō* symbol by hand is regarded as an important meditation exercise in Zen Buddhism, during which the mind is fully in the moment.



円相
Ensō
円相

According to Audrey Yoshiko Seo, author of *Ensō: Zen Circles of Enlightenment*, *ensō* 'are symbols of (amongst other things) personal development, reality and enlightenment. Seemingly perfect in their continuity, balance and feeling of completeness and yet often irregular in their execution, *ensō* are simultaneously the most simple and the most complex form. They seem to allow little room for variation, but in the hands of Zen masters the range of personal expressions they can convey is almost limitless.'

Ensō perfectly represents the things for which this book and my vision on leadership stand. It is a practical handbook, based on everyday reality. Not a lifeless summary of regurgitated methodology, but a guide that can lead you towards the development of your own form of leadership. A digest of fundamentally simple principles that you can apply in your own unique and authentic way.

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The ensō circle can be closed or open, as shown on the cover of this book. An open circle is incomplete, so that further movement and development is possible. Zen practitioners relate the idea of the open circle to the concept of *wabi-sabi*, a view of the world focused on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. The seven dimensions of *wabi-sabi* are: *fukinsei* (asymmetry and imperfection), *kanso* (simplicity), *koko* (soberness), *shizen* (naturalness), *yugen* (subtlety), *datsuzoku* (freedom) and *seijaku* (tranquillity). These principles can all be found in nature, but also in human character and behaviour. *Wabi-sabi* underlines the importance of re-establishing contact with these principles. And that is precisely what we will also do by applying the leadership vision of *Everyone Can Lead*.

不均齊

Fukinsei

asymmetry and imperfection.

Nature is neither symmetrical nor perfect. In the same way, there is no such thing as a perfect and all-inclusive form of leadership. Leadership is human and personal. As a result, it is unique but also has flaws. *Fukinsei* means letting go of inflexibility and embracing instead the beauty of perfect imperfection, so that others can participate in the creative process and thereby evolve towards something that is truly innovative and inspirational. In *Everyone Can Lead* we will examine both our strong and our less strong qualities, so that we can bring the very best that we have to offer to the surface. That will be our innovative and unique style of leadership.

簡素

Kanso *simplicity.*

Kanso means expressing things in a clear, simple and natural way. It reminds us not to think in terms of embellishment, but in terms of clarity, the kind of clarity that can only be achieved by omitting or excluding everything that is not essential. Simple is better; less is more! In this way, *Everyone Can Lead* reduces leadership to its essence: two simple basic principles that are pragmatic and easily applicable in practice, clearly illustrated with relevant examples and exercises.

考古

Koko *soberness.*

Koko places an emphasis on sobriety and austerity. Everything that is not necessary must be discarded. The aim is to create something that gives a feeling of focus and clarity. Koko also means that the personality and character of the artist are visible in his work. *Everyone Can Lead* shuns complex and externally imposed models and theories. My vision of leadership offers everyone the opportunity to develop their own personal form of leadership; the form that best expresses who they are.

自然

Shizen *naturalness.*

Shizen means an absence of all pretension or artificiality, focusing instead on complete, unforced and creative intention. The aim is to find a balance between being part of nature, whilst at the same time distinguishing ourselves from it. Shizen seeks to foster natural behaviour that is neither contrived nor self-important, but is perfectly attuned to the impact and the results you wish to achieve. As a result, Authentic Adaptability plays an important role in *Everyone Can Lead*. You take your own nature as your starting point, but adjust it where necessary, consciously and sincerely, to reflect the context in which you find yourself.

幽玄

Yugen *subtlety.*

Yugen means revealing more while showing less. In simple terms, the Zen vision involves making use of the power of suggestion; you always leave something to the imagination of the viewer. As you read this book, you will need to call on your own powers of imagination to create and shape your own form of leadership. The book will offer you principles and insights, but how you apply them is up to you. It is for you to decide how, where and when you want to lead.

脱俗

Datsuzoku *freedom.*

Datsuzoku encourages you to escape from ordinariness and daily routine, allowing you to feel as though you have transcended the conventional and the banal. Once achieved, this results in a sensation of pleasant surprise and unexpected amazement. Whenever you break through a jaded pattern of behaviour, new creativity and inventiveness automatically come to the surface. If you make active use of this book, you will learn to recognise the old, often unconscious, habits that are holding you back, allowing you to replace them with new and more appropriate behaviour. Leadership means freely and deliberately choosing the action that seems most suitable in any given situation.

静寂

Seijaku *tranquillity.*

Seijaku brings a feeling of 'active rest' and calm into the hustle and bustle of daily life. Being in a state of active rest, with the calm and solitude this involves, makes it possible for you to find the essence of creative energy. In the hectic organisations that characterise the modern business world, this is perhaps the most difficult of the seven principles of wabi-sabi to apply. In *Everyone Can Lead*, calm and active rest are crucial elements for accurately assessing the context and your environment, thereby allowing you to implement the most appropriate leadership intervention. Last but not least, with this book I wish to help you to reflect in silence and repose on yourself, so that you can discover the very best versions of who you truly are. You cannot do this without seijaku.



FOREWORD

You don't need a **title
to be *a leader*.** anonymous

Everyone leads. Your words and actions inevitably have an influence on the feelings and thoughts of others, which in turn has an influence on their words and actions. Sometimes this influence is conscious, more often it is unconscious. That brings us to the essence of this book: pausing to reflect on the ways in which your words and behaviour influence others and how you – can – lead them. Everything starts with self-awareness and self-insight. As the level of your self-insight continues to grow, you can use your influence and your leadership consciously to bring out the best in others. You do this by first starting with yourself, by being the best person you can possibly be. For me, that is what personal leadership means: bringing out the best in yourself and in others.

Via this book, I want to make clear how personal leadership can contribute towards meaning, happiness and well-being in the shape of personal satisfaction and excellent results. I believe that every person in an organisation can make a positive contribution, for himself, for his colleagues, and for the organisation as a whole. I have called this vision of leadership *The Leadership Connection*. Why? In part because Positive Connection is one of the basic principles in that vision and in part because I hope to create a connection between everyone who is favourable towards my vision. The Leadership Connection is a call to deal consciously with the influence that you possess. A call to bring out the best in yourself and in others. I sincerely hope that this book can 'lead' you towards your own form of personal leadership.

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‘Surely not another book about leadership?’ I can hear some of you thinking. ‘There are already so many!’ Indeed there are, so many that it is almost impossible to keep count of their number. However, the vast majority of these books are about hierarchical leadership. You should already have understood from the preceding pages that *The Leadership Connection* is also about – in fact, primarily about – personal leadership. In this book, I will address everyone in an organisation, and not just its hierarchical leaders. In other words, personal leadership as the basis for all other forms of leadership. *The Leadership Connection* goes beyond the precepts of the standard models; it is a vision on leadership, a philosophy. With *The Leadership Connection*, I want to get back to the essence of leadership. To do this, I went in search of the two universal basic principles that form the foundations of good leadership: Positive Connection and Authentic Adaptability. I will offer you the necessary components to build up strong Positive Connections during your work. Authentic Adaptability means that you need to adjust your leadership style in your own way to meet the needs of the context and situation. This involves using different styles of leadership that you possess to respond in the best possible way to the prevailing circumstances, so that you can achieve the best possible results.

In the first instance, this book is experience based rather than evidence based. The book’s vision is based on my own experience and the experiences of all the people I have worked with during the past thirty years. I have learnt much from positive examples and even more from less positive examples. *Everyone Can Lead* is therefore intended as a practical – and practice-based – book. At the same time, many of the elements in my vision are also supported by scientific research. What you will not find in this book, however, is perfection. Perfection does not exist. Or as the *ensō* symbol on the cover suggests: striving for perfection is already perfection. I am the first to admit that I regularly make mistakes in the application of my own vision. Each day I try to learn from these mistakes and to take another new step in the right direction. *The Leadership Connection* is a journey, not a destination.

The development and dissemination of *The Leadership Connection* is my way of giving meaning and purpose to what I do. I truly hope that *The Leadership Connection* can make a positive difference to you and your organisation. I will be a happy man if, by applying the basic principles and practices described in this book, you can focus more on the win-win combination of work satisfaction and excel-

lent organisational results. By looking at leadership in the way I describe it in The Leadership Connection, I hope that I can help to set in motion a movement that 'leads' organisations and the people who work for them towards greater meaning, happiness and well-being. If we can achieve this, it will make not only the business world, but also the world in general a better place. I wish you enjoyable reading and a fascinating journey along the path that will guide you towards your own unique form of personal leadership.

Frans

► In this book I use numerous examples. They are all based on my own practical experience, but I have made them anonymous. In fact, many of the examples are based on a combination of situations. In this sense, they are realistic, but not real. Any similarity with existing people and/or organisations is purely coincidental.

In this book I use 'he', 'his' and 'him' when referring to persons. This makes the book more readable. I wish, however, to emphasise that I am addressing my words to everyone: male, female and gender neutral.

Finally, I would advise everyone to start reading this book from the beginning. It will provide you with useful information about, amongst other things, the 'why' of this book and also the role of leadership in the organisational context of today. If, however, you prefer to get straight down to putting my vision into practice, I suggest you start by going immediately to the section entitled 'Guiding principle 1 – Positive Connection'.



WHY A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK?

Leadership is
unlocking people's potential
to become *better*. Bill Bradley, former U.S. senator

The Leadership Connection brings leadership back to its essence: how can you bring out the best in yourself and others? This practical handbook will show how your personal leadership can lead to greater happiness and better results at work. Not only for you, but also for those around you.

For me, all forms of leadership start with personal leadership. For this kind of leadership, you don't need a team or a hierarchical 'boss'. Leadership is a process of positive influencing. As Luk Dewulf so perfectly expressed it in his book *Go with your talent*, personal leadership begins with doing what you like doing and what you are good at doing. In other words, bringing out the best in yourself. If you can combine this with making a Positive Connection with others, you will achieve a form of personal leadership that not only brings the best out of yourself, but also out of those others. Think, for example, of the difference between a receptionist who fails to say anything when people enter the office and a receptionist who wishes everyone a cheerful 'good morning' or 'good afternoon'. In the latter instance, the receptionist brings out the best in himself and in so doing creates a positive impact that brings out the best in others. That too is leadership – and it comes very close to what Mahatma Gandhi meant when he said: 'Be the change you want to see in the world.'

Via this book, I want to show you how and why leadership – bringing the best out of yourself and others – can make the best possible contribution to your own work satisfaction, to that of your colleagues and to the objectives of your organi-

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sation. The book is intended for everyone who is active in an organisation, whether as an individual employee or as a hierarchical leader, whether temporarily or permanently engaged, whether as a salaried member of staff or as a volunteer. Anyone and everyone can use this book to immediately take their first steps towards personal leadership. In the first instance, this will improve your personal work satisfaction. But you will soon notice that it also has a positive influence on your colleagues and your immediate environment. This is the real power of personal leadership. If you are a hierarchical leader, it is even more important that you bring out the best out in your people. You can do this either by attempting to rely exclusively on your hierarchical rank and title or else you can do it by demonstrating leadership based on who you are as a person. The respect and recognition that result from this latter option are always more effective than hierarchical authority and its associated punishments and rewards.

There are many different forms of personal leadership and hierarchical leadership. Choosing the form of leadership that is most suitable for you is crucial if you wish to find work satisfaction in what you do and to have a positive impact on others. Unfortunately, this is often where things go wrong. Many employees in organisations opt, often unconsciously, for forms and methods of working that are not well matched to their talents, preferences and personal style. These choices are made based on values and beliefs that are imposed on us by society, our upbringing and our environment. Values and beliefs that do not necessarily contribute to our work satisfaction. How many technical experts agree to take on a management role, only to discover that the extra salary in no way compensates for the resulting loss of job satisfaction? How many employees believe that they have little or no impact on their organisation? How many managers think that they always need to know all the answers? Instances of this kind have negative consequences, not only for the work satisfaction of the people in question, but also for the work satisfaction of their colleagues and for the effectiveness of the wider organisation. This book wants to show you the paths that you can follow in your pursuit of the form of leadership that is most appropriate for you and will allow you to bring out the best in yourself and those around you.

The basic question is therefore this: 'What kind of leader do you want to be?' This applies equally to both personal leadership and hierarchical leadership. What kind of impact do you want to have on your organisation? What contribution do you

wish to make? These are all questions about meaning and happiness. Through your work in the organisation, how do you intend to find satisfaction in what you do and bring purpose to your life? There are many different forms of personal and hierarchical leadership that can help you to achieve this. Each of us has our own unique talents, preferences and style. In this book we will search together to find the best way for you to do your job and to discover how you can best be a leader in a manner that matches who you are.

My aim with this practical handbook is to help you to become the 'leader you want to be', the leader who can bring out the best in himself and in others. How will I do this? By sharing the insights that I have acquired during my long professional career. By passing on to you the basic principles and good practices that I have experienced over many years, not only first hand but also (and primarily) through the many people with whom I have had the privilege to work. By allowing you to discover possibilities and opportunities for improvement and by helping you to avoid potential pitfalls and traps. Moreover, by making this book a practical book, I have tried to ensure that the content will be as recognisable as possible. I have made no use of abstract, theoretical concepts, preferring to focus on simple basic principles that you can use in everyday practice. Even so, you need to remember that 'simple' is not the same as 'easy'. The simplest principles are often the most difficult to apply consistently in practice. For example, building on the (professional) ambitions, talents and preferences of your colleagues is much easier said than done. It requires attention, interest and time: resources that are increasingly scarce in our high-speed, high-intensity world.

Last but not least, for me this book is a way to return to the simplicity that embodies the essence of leadership. In recent years, I have seen far too many (and far too expensive) complex theories and leadership models that are supposed to have all the answers. I have seen too many organisations struggle painfully to push their people into the strait jacket of a uniform leadership model. I have seen too much human potential that remains wasted and unused. I have seen too many people lose their individuality by trying to conform to stereotypical views of leadership. Perhaps worst of all, I have seen far too many people who are unhappy in their work. For me, finding the best possible version of yourself and helping others to do the same is the fundamental basis of all leadership. As Leonardo da Vinci once said: 'Simplicity is the ultimate refinement.'

