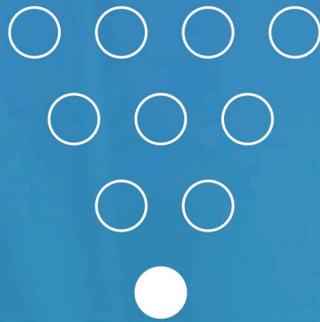


# Rethinking



# Leadership

**Building capacity for positive change**

**Peter Kaldor, Naomi Nash and Sophie Paterson**

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# Introduction

There has to be a better way

*We assume we paddle our organisational canoes on calm lakes, and periodically have to go through some temporary white water. But we never get out of the white water. We think things will settle down after whatever is now upsetting things is over, but things never settle down because some other upset always comes along.*

– Peter Vaill<sup>1</sup>

ARE YOU PART of an organisation facing disruptive change? Or wanting to make a positive difference in complex situations? We live in times where swirling change is the norm. Change is often more challenging than we expect. Tossed about by loud voices, competing agendas and options we start to lose traction. Wheels spinning, we dig a deep hole for ourselves and our teams. Researchers commonly suggest 70% of change initiatives fail.<sup>2</sup>

If you are looking at this book you probably already recognise that creating change and contributing leadership in the uncertain, unpredictable and volatile world in which we live is not a simple task.

Perhaps you are in a social sector agency, business, union, church or community group, facing challenges to do with a changing community, changing needs, practices, government expectations, advancing technology, increasingly global markets, increasing competition. You might be experimenting with new possibilities. You might be in a school facing big questions about how to best equip students for a future no-one can yet see. Or involved in community development or social action. You might be trying to support others through consultancy, mentoring or coaching.

Perhaps you face complex challenges at home or in your community. Or, as a parent you might be doing well with one child yet struggling with another due to factors out of your control within the family, school or wider community.

You may have a role where you are responsible for delivering outcomes and generating change. You are struggling to develop ways forward, things are a bit precarious and people are anxious. What might effective leadership look like in your context?

Or you may be in middle management seeing damage being done by people further up the food chain who think they know best but lack detailed understanding of the coalface. How to respond?

Or you may sit at the foot of the table without formal responsibilities, yet have a desire to make a positive difference. Can a pivotal change in an organisation's direction ever come from the bottom up?

You may see yourself as a good leader and want to be a better one. Or maybe you have doubts, even feeling you are an imposter. Or you might want to reject the leadership paradigms you have experienced. You don't want any part of anything that encourages dominating manipulative people wielding power because they can.

We all face a common question: *how can we contribute effectively to making a positive difference amidst the complexity around us?*

If you are passionate about what you do and wish to engage authentically and meaningfully with people, this book might help. If you value honesty, authenticity and personal growth, it might help. If you stay awake at night balancing pressures to achieve strategic outcomes, are distressed about wasted opportunities or ineffectual behaviour, or see the limitations of how things currently are, we believe this book might make a real difference.

## The seductive myth of superhero leaders

*It is critical that leaders resist assuming the role of saviour, even as people beg for it.*

- Margaret Wheatley<sup>3</sup>

WE OFTEN TALK about 'leadership', meaning very different things. Sometimes 'leadership' is about position or formal roles, other times gifted people with particular traits. Sometimes it denotes people who inspire, other times it is about control or management. No wonder we trip up in thinking about it!

So often beneath ideas about leadership is an all-encompassing myth that 'good' leaders are 'special' people with special gifts and powers. In the 1950s cowboys rode in to rescue hapless citizens before riding off into the sunset. Today intergalactic superheroes do something similar, but the message is the same: a hero single-handedly saves the day.

Historically researchers saw leaders as being special people and sought to identify the characteristics of their greatness. While research has moved on, everyday practice too often has not. Must we try to be superheroes with special powers, eventually collapsing disappointed and broken from the effort? Or wait for a superhero to rescue us?

Leadership is a massive growth industry. Amazon lists over 500,000 books with 'leader' as a keyword. Millions are spent on books, superstar presenters and international gurus (nearly always white, male westerners). People flock to hear their secrets, to become the superheroes they feel they need to be. Yet for all this effort and expenditure the cry for 'good leadership' today is louder than ever.

Superficially attractive, heroic thinking is naïve and dangerous. We've all witnessed leaders who, like bulls in china shops, impose radical changes to staffing, systems or priorities in ways that dramatically damage morale, performance and commitment, reducing rather than enhancing organisational capacity to navigate change. Sometimes their egos seem all that survive the toxic cultures they create. Sometimes that doesn't survive either.

We try to be someone we can never be, till we collapse, exhausted and broken, with a disillusioned audience. In New River's consultancy work we hear one horror story after another of such leadership having unfortunate, unintended consequences. What works in movies doesn't translate into the real world. It is what it is: escapist fantasy.

Part of the reason we have lost our way is that we have conflated 'leadership' with positional authority, attached notions of greatness and prestige to it, and invested in leadership development for this special few. Like barnacles on the hull of a boat this creates drag on our collective ability to achieve change. Perhaps a focus on producing great leaders - special people able to achieve the impossible - is missing something?

It's time to rewrite the script. Perhaps this book can help.

## A better way?

*Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.*

- Leonard Cohen

THERE ARE MANY books on particular styles or ways of doing leadership, or wisdom from individual experiences in leadership. Here, however, we seek to do something different: to bring together key lessons from a wide range of leadership research and to rethink our notions of leadership right from the very definition we have for it.

From solid foundations we can look more clearly at how to grow leadership, build organisational capacity and navigate complexity. We need these solid foundations around something as important as 'leadership'. It is more than a role, more than management, more than a trait and not just about people in positions of authority.

What if, rather than focusing on leadership as a personal trait some possess, we look at it as something a group needs to which we can contribute? How about this:

*Leadership is a critical ingredient in the healthy functioning of a group to enable it to discover and move towards its core purposes.*

Once we shift our thinking away from heroic individuals to collective action to achieve group purposes, many things fall into place.

Different kinds of leadership contributions are needed. Those of us in positions of authority need to consider ways of **developing and leveraging leadership capacity**, growing a leadership culture, where leadership flourishes rather than relying on a few louder, more confident or charismatic people.

After stripping away the wealth, authority and status elements from leadership thinking we are left with its most important elements, as explored in this book: the ability to take effective individual and collective action in a complex world to make a positive difference.

What if, rather than reserving leadership development for a special few, a luxury item for those at the top, we gave everyone access to high quality leadership development and the chance to discover how they can contribute to a positive future? Might this unlock greater resources for the task ahead? We believe so.

By rethinking leadership, we can create a positive future.

# Four key questions

*Rethinking Leadership* invites you on a two-step journey: to first rethink your paradigms of leadership, and then to reshape your practices. It explores four critical questions:

1. What are the challenges we face?
2. How can we build effective leadership for complex times?
3. How can we develop agility with ongoing change?
4. How can we each contribute authentically and sustainably?

## Why take this journey?

THE BENEFIT OF stepping back and exploring these four questions, is firstly equipping you and your team with a language and lens for naming the realities of your context. Frustration with unpredictable situations, stuck systems and unfocussed teams is a natural consequence of life in complexity. In **Part 1**, we illuminate the dynamics that are at play in most contemporary organisations and offer you fresh ways of looking at your situation. With this perspective and clarity, you can let go of needing to control the impossible and instead discover a different way forward.

Similarly, by shifting your mindset on leadership you will discover that there is more capacity around you than you realise. **Part 2** moves beyond the mythology of heroic, command and control leadership and into a space where there is room for a multidimensional understanding. This broader view can unlock possibility and potential in your team, as well as increasing their engagement in the foundational purposes of your organisation. These are critical assets if you are seeking to move forward and even flourish amidst complexity.

There is increasing pressure on organisations to be innovative, step out into the unknown and stay ahead of the shifting sands. A loss of traction and impact can be the result of failing to adjust the ways we are working in light of these pressures. The alternative we explore in **Part 3** is the opportunity teams have to change the ways they work, to become more agile and collaborative. The rewards of such a shift can be huge, developing teams that can move safely through uncertainty, work creatively and purposefully, and organisations capable of learning.

In some contexts, there is so much toxicity or brokenness in the system that it is difficult to make any real impact. Turning the tide begins with individuals who have the courage to change themselves, considering both how they act and what they choose to act on.

**Part 4** steps through a process of discovering your leadership strengths, exploring your core purposes and how to authentically bring them to the table alongside others. The result will be greater energy, imagination and hopefulness about facing the challenges before you and stronger personal foundations for when things get tough.

The value of reading this book will be in the changes you make to your own practice and to that of others with whom you work.

## A solid base for thinking

THERE ARE MANY “how to” books numbering key principles for effective leadership, written largely from anecdotal experience, suggesting success comes from following formulaic answers. This is NOT one of those books. Drawing widely on thinking from across different schools can enrich leadership practice (*see Figure I.1 overleaf*).

We bring together here a wide range of thinking about leadership and change. Built on robust theoretical foundations it provides a positive model for unlocking capacity and developing authentic practice. We explore leadership thinking over the last century, from great man models of leadership (to the 1950s), transformational leadership (1970s and 1980s), adaptive leadership (since the 1990s), leadership as contribution (servant leadership) and notions of strengths-based capacity building and collaborative leadership.

We also engage systems theory, organisational dynamics, community development and community organising, personality theory and positive psychology. And, because leadership is not just about what we do but also who we are, we look at authentic leadership, personal development and growing self-awareness.

Peter was involved for decades in systematic quantitative research into effective and sustainable leadership, wellbeing and social capital with NCLS Research, a collaborative research organisation he was involved in founding in 1991. These research findings are included where relevant. Detailed references are included so you can follow up any ideas that spark your curiosity.

## Two crews, one island, opposite outcomes

IN THE FACE of complex disruptive change, how people think about leadership often places limits on teams and organisations. We will explore the experiences of two shipwrecked crews stranded at the same time on a remote island, their ultimate fates strongly linked to their leadership paradigms. Similarly for us today, amid swirling change many established companies lose their way. Kodak and Blackberry broke up on uncharted reefs, while Amazon and Apple could reorient themselves and thrive.

In this book we will meet many people, groups and organisations facing various challenges:

- The principal of a prestigious school with a burning desire to create educational opportunities for Indigenous children, who did, indeed make a positive contribution but in a very different way to what was initially conceived.
- Two development workers in Zambia, concerned by preventable diarrhoea-related child mortality, who developed an ingenious award-winning solution that was both critical and totally irrelevant.
- Facing a shock financial disaster, the CEO of a community organisation stepped up to make hard decisions to save it. Or did he limit it?
- The power plant down the road from the well-known Fukushima nuclear power that also faced the wrath of the 2011 tsunami.
- A team of remote area fire-fighters facing an on-rushing wildfire who discovered the potential of creative genius, and the limits of a poor team culture.

- A chemical engineer who, leaving a multinational where the most important conversations happened in the car park, set out to create a company encouraging serial innovation and quality communication. You may make use of this company's rain jackets, guitar strings, electrical cables or dental floss, but are less likely to be using the space suits to which they contributed.

What can we learn from them and others? We have used pseudonyms where appropriate.

In each case, assumptions about leadership significantly affected outcomes. Like seismic forces deep below the earth's surface, leadership assumptions can affect things dramatically.

## The research basis for this book

Aspect	Chapters	Key idea
<b>1. Leadership and complex change</b>		
Systems theory	1, 7-11	Leadership involves engaging complex human systems.
Adaptive leadership	2, 7-11	Moving people beyond work avoidance.
<b>2. Rethinking leadership</b>		
Classical 'greatman' thinking	3	Leadership is about particular people with special traits.
Leadership and positional authority - Community organising	4	Leadership can be exercised with or without formal authority. Leadership is about listening and collective action.
Leadership as multi-dimensional	5	Healthy groups need many different types of leadership contributions.
Task and people dimensions	5	Leadership includes both relational and task aspects.
Purpose focussed - Transformational leadership	5	Leadership includes both growing shared directions and sound management.
Personality theory	12	We bring different capacities depending on our personalities.
<b>3. Leadership as a collaborative endeavour</b>		
Shared or distributed leadership	6	Groups need interlocking collaborative contributions from many.
Positive organisations	6	Positive cultures build productivity, motivation and personal satisfaction.

#### 4. Engaging complex change and developing organisational agility

Change management	7	Complex challenges require adaptive responses: traditional approaches may be inadequate.
Learning organisations	7	Organisations need to learn and grow from experiences.
Personal transitions	8	Change typically involves anxiety and deep personal transitions.
Experimentation and innovation	9	Organisations need to foster group genius and safe-to-fail experimentation.
Unpredictable systems	10	Iterative practices will minimise risk.
Organisational agility	11	Organisational agility is foundational to navigating change.

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#### 5. Leadership from a Strengths-based Perspective

Strengths-based thinking and positive psychology	12, 14	Working with our strengths is a pathway to both personal effectiveness and well-being.
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#### 6. Not just what we do, but who we are

Authentic leadership	13	Leadership is not just about what we do, but who we are.
Burnout/emotional exhaustion	13	Sustainability is vital to long term effectiveness.
Personal foundations	14	Strong personal foundations can hold us in challenging times.
Toxic leadership dynamics	15	Internal drivers that lead us into unhealthy practices.
Personal development strategies	15	Self-awareness is a lifelong path to effective leadership.

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*Figure I.1 The research basis for this book*

## How to best use this book

**THIS BOOK COVERS** a lot of territory. Take your time. Don't rush. Create space to get a bird's eye view of your work and life, asking yourself: '*What is this saying to me?*' Use the reflective questions at the end of each chapter to help.

Ideally don't read this book alone! Growing shared understanding and language for leadership in a team is an invaluable investment. Step through chapter by chapter together, exploring both ideas and your situation. What questions, possibilities or priorities emerge?

# What people are saying about Rethinking Leadership...

*Traditional approaches to leadership may have served us in more settled times but they pull up well short in this new, fast-changing world. It is a well-researched, readable and practical guide to moving from individualistic leadership to harnessing the array of gifts and skills of the group.* – **Harvey Collins, Non-executive Director Navitas Limited and Save the Children Australia, Chairman Insitor Impact Asia Fund and executive coach**

*Rethinking Leadership makes a compelling case that traditional ideas and ways of thinking about leadership don't work. It provides a range of frameworks and practices to navigate change and complexity, and build a leadership practice that is adaptive, agile and authentic. For anyone interested in making change in the world, in your organisation or community this is a valuable, comprehensive resource to guide you through.* – **Liz Skelton, Director Collaboration for Impact and co-author The Australian Leadership Paradox**

*The core concepts here have helped me considerably working with companies facing disruptive change, both as a chairman and coach to CEOs.* – **Ian Pollard, company chairman, executive coach & writer**

*A beautifully thought out, well-designed read that can be easily navigated: a rare example of 'simplicity on the other side of complexity'. A must read for anyone seeking to step into the unknown and play a role in bringing about change in the complex and ever moving world we live in.* – **Bessi Graham Co-Founder/CEO The Difference Incubator**

*The problem with disruptive change is that a bumper sticker philosophy doesn't work. Rethinking Leadership outlines practical ways for groups to constructively engage such complexity. This book turns the myth of the superhero leader on its head and speaks powerfully to a generation looking for better ways forward.* – **Trevor Thomas, Managing Director Ethinvest, Trustee John T Reid Charitable Trusts and Community Impact Foundation**

*Not here a shopping-list template or an alpha-leader who rallies a tribe by force of will. "Rethinking Leadership" starts at a different place altogether.*

– **Steve Collis, workplace and learning environment strategist**

*We have had first-hand experience in our school of transforming a top down leadership model into a something very different to meet the challenges of contemporary education. It has been incredibly rewarding. This book offers life-giving frameworks for this. It is a must-read manual for developing effective sustained change within your school. It challenges your thinking about your own leadership and can help you stay sane and strong. The ideas here helped us be at our very best in the transformation.* – **Doug Thomas and Janelle Ford, Principal and Deputy Principal, Claremont College**

*A scholarly yet engaging work with lots of stories and personal/group exercises. I highlighted many many sections that I need to come back to and think about.*

– **Dr Bruce Robinson AM, Professor of Medicine, Physician, Director of NHMRC Research Centre of Excellence, the multi-award winning Fathering Project and Western Australian of the Year**

*For many First Nations leaders, we are continually hindered and frustrated by the speed of social change, and the accompanying complexity of adapting to disruption and rapid change. This book is definitely overdue! The wisdom here could be quite life changing.* – **Ray Minniecon, Aboriginal community activist and chaplain**

*Emanating trustworthiness with its good solid leadership scholarship the book is full of sound leadership practice. Its format is rather like a virtual coaching experience. If I was teaching leadership to students or recommending books that provide an overview of the field, this would be one. If I think of young emerging leaders I have coached, I am sure that they would find something in it to reassure themselves. And, if I had come home from work as a leader responsible for a thorny leadership problem, I would use the book as a reference and find a way forward!*

– **Hilary Armstrong, PhD, Director Changeworks, leadership coaching and culture change**

*A breath of fresh air. The authors address bullet points we've been staring at for years by looking at them from a new angle, or from a perspective we've somehow lost. This book is worthy of your time and attention and should be prioritised in this year's reading list.* – **Julian Dunham, Arrow Leadership, International Development**

*A comprehensive primer for all the important change and leadership theories as well as a tool for connecting oneself to the challenges we face in trying to lead in the real world. Probably most importantly, it is grounded in the idea of leadership being about a real contribution to the world.* – **Geoff Aigner, Executive Director Social Innovation, Life Without Barriers**

*Rethinking Leadership is an insightful and practical guide to the kind of leadership that is required for real change and engagement. If we care about the broader community we live in, then collaborative, engaging and non-traditional leadership practice and models are needed. This book is a template for how to go about it.* – **Michael Traill, Chair, Social Ventures Australia and Goodstart Early Learning, Director MH Carnegie and Co. and Author Jumping Ship**

*The democratising of leadership will create the change we want to see in our institutions and communities. This book is an outstanding overview of the type of contemporary leadership that can help an individual or organisation take positive steps into this future.* – **Doug Taylor, Director Uniting NSW/ACT, Board member Australian Centre for Social Innovation**

*Anyone involved in leadership in the social sector will value this book because it is a unique resource that encompasses all the latest research and provides a practical guide about how to be an effective leader in a community setting.* – **Jill Reich, Director People and Systems, Uniting NSW/ACT**

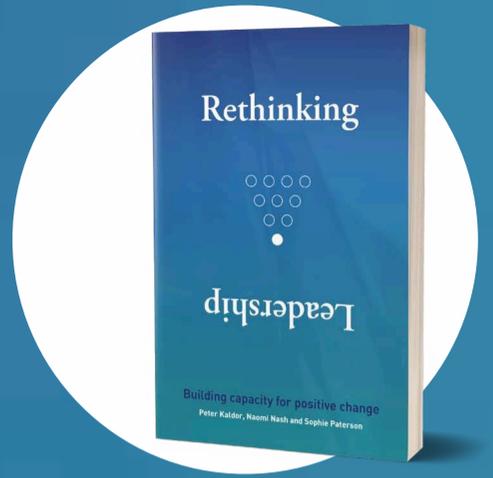
*An antidote to the toxicity of leadership models that rely on an individualistic, messiah-like vision of leadership.* – **Darrell Jackson, Associate Professor Morling College Sydney**

*A fantastic approach to reflecting on our own leadership styles and experiences, and how we act in the context of change.* – **Maayan Adler, management consultant with PwC**

# Rethinking Leadership

Building capacity for positive change

Peter Kaldor, Naomi Nash and Sophie Paterson



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The models of leadership we have inherited are broken. Though deeply embedded in our psyches, superhero models of leadership are destructive: both for leaders who try to live up to them, and for followers seeking cost free change.

Rethinking Leadership is an essential companion for people seeking to make a positive difference in the midst of complexity.

For teams and organisations committed to growing more agile and effective practices that can unlock innovation and real change, doing the work of Rethinking Leadership can be a game-changing choice.



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