



The
LEADERS
ECOSYSTEM

A Guide to Leading, Exceptionally

Dr PAIGE WILLIAMS

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The Leader's Ecosystem

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ABOUT DR PAIGE WILLIAMS

DR PAIGE WILLIAMS IS AN AUTHOR, RESEARCHER and PhD in organisational behaviour. A trusted advisor and mentor to senior leaders across business, government, education and beyond, Paige uses a potent blend of neuroscience, psychology, and her own extensive international business leadership experience to help leaders see the rules they need to break in order to break through.



The results are dramatic and measurable.

An Honorary Fellow of the Centre for Wellbeing Science and an Associate of Melbourne Business School, Paige is known as a leadership and culture expert. The potent combination of real-life leadership experience and deep academic knowledge fuels Paige's superpower of translating complex ideas and academic research to make them real, relevant, and relatable to the work that leaders do every day. She has helped thousands of leaders across business, government, NGOs and education to lead themselves, their people, and the systems they work in—exceptionally.

Paige has authored five books and her work has been featured in a variety of academic and non-academic journals, including *Psychology Today*, *Smart Company*, *Australian Financial Review* and *Human Resource Management*.

WORK WITH DR PAIGE



If you're looking to create an experience that empowers people to lead through disruption and uncertainty with confidence and clarity, look no further.

Offering practical, evidence-based strategies that can be immediately applied, Dr Paige Williams combines playful humour with a meaningful message and streetwise smarts with evidence-based data, and delivers it in a way that feels like dinner-table conversation.

Whether on a conference stage, or in a lecture theatre or board room, Paige leaves people with the confidence and motivation they need to succeed.

Find out more at [**drpaige.au**](https://drpaige.au)

ALSO BY DR PAIGE WILLIAMS

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Own It!

Your Leadership Blueprint (with Dr Michelle McQuaid)

What Does Good Look Like?

GRATITUDE AND APPRECIATION

WRITING THIS BOOK HAS BEEN A WORK OF PARADOX. FOR THE first time I felt able to write about my thoughts and perspectives without the need to have evidenced-based data to justify every point, and this made it both harder and easier; more joyful and more terrifying. I have had to expand beyond my small ego mind again and again to get out of the way of the words coming through me; an experience for which I have great an appreciation for—now that I’m the other side of it!

I have been inspired by so many authors, thinkers, researchers and artists as I’ve developed the ideas for *The Leaders Ecosystem*. It truly is a work built on the shoulders of giants, for whom I am so grateful, and include Mary Parker Follett, bell hooks, David Whyte, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Edgar Schein, Rupert Spira, Amy Edmonson, Adyashanti, Lisa Miller, Bernardo Kastrop and Michael Singer.

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And finally, to my beautiful partner, Matthew; thank you for all that you do and all that you are. The most precious gift to the world, I am honoured to have you in my life. Always. All ways. All the ways.

INTRODUCTION

IT'S BEEN NEARLY FIFTY YEARS SINCE MY FIRST LEADERSHIP ROLE at six years of age as a 'Sixer' in the Girl Guide Brownies in England. A lot has changed in that time—in me and the contexts in which I lead. But the learning I gathered along the way has stuck. Some of it has been hard won—through mistakes, missteps and mishaps; some of it has been gained through the risks, opportunities and big steps I chose to take without fully knowing that I could land them. And for the last few decades it's been through gathering insights and real world, evidence-based strategies in my research and supervision as a student, researcher and now Honorary Fellow at The University of Melbourne. All of this is captured in the body of work expressed across these nine critical essays in what I call *The Leaders Ecosystem*.

Leaders have many responsibilities, but there is one that supersedes the rest: asking and answering the question "what does good look like?"

Leaders have many responsibilities, but I believe there is one that supersedes the rest: asking and answering the question, 'What does good look like?'

What does good look like for you? For the people you lead? The system you're living and leading within? Indeed, these three orientations—'you, them and it'—become the three primary decision-making vectors all leaders hold.

What does good look like for you to thrive? For your team to achieve their best performance? For you and your work to have positive influence in the world and impact on the planet?

What does good look like in this moment? This meeting? This financial quarter?

We live in a world that demands answers and the pressure for leaders to provide them is intense and undeniable. And yet, my experience is that it's the curiosities and questions I hold that better serve me, the people, and the systems I lead. This is because questions are fateful; we move and grow in the direction of the questions we ask.

Without exception every action we take is preceded by a question, most of which are unconscious. Just think about your day: set a wake-up alarm or not? Hit snooze or get up? What's next—toilet or teeth? And for breakfast ... toast or cereal?

The unconscious nature of our questions is problematic, because when our natural negativity bias runs wild, we automatically ask:

What's wrong?

What's missing?

And what needs fixing?

And while these deficit-focused questions may help to identify the problems we're facing, they rarely generate the energy, commitment and momentum we need to get to where we want (and need) to go next. The uncomfortable truth is, we learn little about excellence by studying failures.

This is a bigger idea though. The idea of what does good leader-ing look like speaks to societal structures and workplace values. It talks to our sense of community and belonging, our personal relationships and goals—where we find joy and love, meaning and purpose. How well we know ourselves and how we connect with others.

Asking and answering, 'What does good look like?' focuses attention, invites contribution and expands perspectives. It creates clarity of purpose, connects people to their common ground and identifies pathways for action. I use it as a constant frame for myself, the leaders I work with and the organisations they lead; the network of ideas I share in this book are the answers we have come to.

Asking, and answering, what does good look like focuses attention, invites contribution, and expands perspectives.

So if there is one thing I invite you to do as you navigate The Leaders Ecosystem, it's to do so with a curious mind, an open heart and this question on your lips: 'What does good look like?'

AN ECOSYSTEM OF IDEAS

In nature, an ecosystem forms through the interactions of organisms and their environment. Living and non-living elements are connected through energy and nutrient flows, and the ecosystem as a whole is controlled by internal and external factors.

The ecosystem that we live and work in operates in a similar way. It is created through the interactions of leaders with other leaders and followers within an organisational context (e.g. your team) or situational environment (e.g. your family). Leaders and followers are the 'living' elements of the ecosystem and their connection with 'non-living' elements such as money, time, information, material resources and information creates a flow of energy and 'nutrients' through the system.

Similar to the way that natural ecosystems are controlled by external factors such as climate and material that forms the soil and topography, so too the ecosystem in which we live and lead is impacted by factors such as global events, market trends and economic climate. And, like those in nature, the resource inputs to our ecosystem are generally controlled by these external factors. However, the availability of the

resources *within* our ecosystem is controlled by internal factors—predominantly leaders.

And right here lies the challenge and complexity of being a leader: not only do we influence and impact processes in our ecosystem such as our teams, organisational culture and work outcomes, we are also controlled and influenced by them. My PhD research explored the processes involved in this and I developed a model that mapped this dynamic—*The Inside-out Outside-In Model*. What it showed is that in a living network, ‘agents of change’, such as leaders, not only effect change but are themselves affected.

An additional challenge for leaders is that ecosystem dynamics are continually shifting because ecosystems *themselves* are inherently dynamic. They experience periodic disturbances as is normal in natural systems, and at the same time are in a continual ‘recovery process’ from past disturbances. The capacity of a natural system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change in order to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedback mechanisms is called its ‘ecological resilience’.

The same is true of the ecosystem in which leaders operate. Uncertainty, disruption and change are constant as we navigate the impact of increasing political polarisation, ongoing disputes in Europe and the Middle East, a waning of energy and interest for DEI initiatives and a growing divide between employer and employees about what good looks like when it comes to where and how to work. Leaders are bestowed the responsibility of creating the system resilience to navigate this complexity while sustaining business as usual and on a trajectory of continual improvement and sustainable high performance. It’s a lot.

What we’ve been told good leadership looks like wasn’t designed to meet the needs, challenges and opportunities of now.

Which is why what has worked before simply won’t anymore. What we’ve been told ‘good’ leadership looks like wasn’t designed to meet the needs, challenges and

opportunities of the ecosystem we live and lead in now. In fact, in a range of polls with CEOs, senior leaders and talent executives there is consensus that at least 50% of the skills leaders need today are skills they don't yet have. And the other 50% are skills that were always needed, but are now required at much higher levels. It's clear from this that we need a flexible, agile and interconnected system of ideas, frameworks and tools to support bigger, better leader-ing so that leaders can successfully lead for high performance through their current and future realities. And that is what The Leaders Ecosystem has been designed to deliver.

The nine topics in The Leaders Ecosystem provide a network of ideas and frameworks for leaders to successfully lead themselves, others and systems to feel well and perform well through uncertainty. Each of the ideas individually will make a difference, but the real advantage of the Ecosystem is in blending and fusing them to create a way forward that meets the unique needs of your situation and context.

The Leaders Ecosystem provides a network of ideas for leaders to successfully lead themselves, others and systems to feel well and perform well through uncertainty.

I've seen leaders use the Ecosystem to successfully:

- Build self-confidence and motivation to lead through challenging times.
- Surface dysfunctional senior leadership team dynamics, break down silos and rebuild trust, connection and compassion.
- Disrupt cycles of underperformance and reset accountability with cross-functional teams.
- Support creativity and innovation and grow by fuelling a culture of trust and psychosocial safety.

THE IDEAS

Through nine essays, this book explores a range of ideas to support leaders in navigating the complex, uncertain ecosystem in which they live and work. Each of the essays has a guiding heuristic question that is central to the topic (more on this below). The essays are:

1. BEYOND RESILIENCE

We're making and keeping ourselves fragile, resilience is no longer enough, and bouncing back simply won't cut it. It's exhausting and it's burning us out.

If you're wondering how to accept change rather than resist it, lean into challenge rather than be overwhelmed by it, and how to benefit rather than break from the ongoing uncertainty and disruption, then this will help.

Guiding question: *How can we be better coming out of this that we were coming in?*

2. BETTER TOGETHER

We are better together. It really is that simple. Navigating complexity and uncertainty, solving complex problems in creative ways, and sustaining the energy to keep making progress requires the collective capacity inherent in teams.

If you want to move your team from fear to confidence, from avoidance to accountability, and from drama and frustration to focus and action, this will provide a way forward.

Guiding question: *What is not being said or asked?*

3. CULTURES THAT COUNT

Culture makes or breaks the experience of work; for people and the outcomes they can achieve together. As leaders, we ignore it at our peril. In complex and uncertain environments, antifragile culture creates the context and conditions for teams to succeed and thrive.

If intentionally creating and sustaining a culture that supports thriving and high performance is on your to-do list, this will help.

Guiding question: *What culture are we creating in this moment?*

4. AVOIDING AVOIDANCE

Avoiding truth doesn't make it disappear. But we do it. We call it 'being polite'. We pretend it's to avoid offending others. But what it's really about is avoiding hard things. And at some point, we've got to face them because if we don't, a rot grows in our cultures, our teams, and our personal relationships that impacts everything we do.

If you're fed up with the pretence in your conversations and feeling stuck but don't know why, this uncomfortable conversation could be what breaks you through.

Guiding question: *How am I orienting to truth?*

5. AMPLIFYING ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is an act of love that invites greatness. It's the antidote to the epidemic of underperformance plaguing teams: activity but no progress, meetings but no follow up, confused responsibilities, impossible demands, missed milestones, low morale, poor engagement, talent drain.

If you're wondering how to balance the tension between showing your people you care and meeting the business needs of accountability, the answer is here.

Guiding question: *What's mine to own?*

6. THE LEVERAGE OF LOVE

Leading with love is the single most potent leverage point for a leader. If we are going to create successful multi-generational teams that can make the most of the opportunities and navigate the challenges of the 21st century workplace, we need to bring love front and centre.

If you're unsure how to meet the demand of millennial generations for leaders who genuinely care about who they are—in work and beyond, this is for you.

Guiding question: *What would love do?*

7. FINDING TRUE

We're in the midst of a crisis of confidence. Untethered, with little to anchor to within, we instead look outside ourselves for some kind of solid foundation. But rather than giving us strength, this external search makes us even more vulnerable and fragile in a turbulent and complex world.

If you feel like you're dancing in the dark, tripping and stumbling without knowing why, finding your True could be the light you're looking for.

Guiding question: *Am I listening to my True?*

8. THE POWER OF PARTNERING

To build organisations where more people feel ready, willing, and able to lead, we need a paradigm of partnering. Domination dynamics—the traditional power model for workplaces—no longer serve us.

If you need authentic engagement, creative innovation, willing contribution and diverse perspectives from your people to meet the demands, challenges and possibilities ahead, this essay is for you.

Guiding question: *How can I 'with' more in this moment?*

9. LEADING UNBOUND

Expectation. Obligation. Resentment. The trifecta of a life bound.

Disconnected, disempowered and without love for self, this silent suffering creates drama, power play and pain in our workplaces, teams, families and friendships every day. There is another way.

If you want a life with space, expansion and joy; to lead with sovereignty, confidence and understanding; a space where—without unconscious agendas driven by fear—even the hard becomes easy, your start point is here.

Guiding question: *Can I hold a bigger space?*

WRITTEN WITH YOU IN MIND

The thing about leader-ing is that it is rarely logical, linear or predictable. The complexity, uncertainty and constant change that we have to manage on a moment-to-moment, day-in day-out basis means that we need ideas and tools that are immediately accessible and applicable. The time it takes to read to chapter six of a book before discovering the 'golden nugget' that you need right now means the moment has probably passed, and the nugget is now a nice idea that you might apply one day—if you remember it!

In working with leaders for a few decades now, I know how important it is that the ideas I share are relevant, relatable and realistic, in that they can see how they can use them in the work they do day to day. The Leaders Ecosystem has been designed with the time, attention, and energy-poor reality of leaders in mind. Here's how:

1. Everything you need, nothing you don't

The book is structured in essays rather than chapters, which means I can cover a wide range of topics in a variety of ways within one book, rather than writing chapters that deep-dive into various aspects of the same topic. This means that you get everything you need and nothing you don't on a particular topic in a time- and attention-effective way. Because let's face it—you have enough to do.

2. Explicit and clear

Because you have enough to do, you don't have to use any of your time, effort or energy trying to extract the 'nutrition' from this book. That's why there are signposts to show you where ideas across the essays connect to each other—it makes explicit and clear the structure of the network. Now I'm not for a moment suggesting these are *all* the connections—I hope you see and find others; but they are the ones I wouldn't want you to miss. We've made it easy for you to see these by including a signpost in the text that points you to the connection essay, like this: ($\sum \mathbf{1} \rightarrow$).

3. No right or wrong

There is no 'one way' to read the book. While the essays are organised in a structure (more on this below), they have not been written to be read 'in order'. You can read one, a few or all of the essays in one sitting, or spread them out over a period of time so that they support you as different situations, opportunities and challenges arise in your world. My hope is that you will return to read and re-read the ideas here many times.

4. Describing not prescribing

You are the expert of you and your context. Honouring and respecting that means that I do not *prescribe* how to do the work that needs to be done, but rather *describe* what it is and why it's needed, and then

provide some general examples of what it *could* look like. Inspired action that makes sense and has impact in your world is what we're aiming for.

NAVIGATING THE ECOSYSTEM

We talked earlier about the interconnected nature of the elements of an ecosystem. This creates system complexity, and the challenge we have as leaders is to try to make sense of the dynamics between the elements. One way to do this is to look at *levels* within the system, which in human systems can be used to identify different points of action and impact.

In designing the Leaders Ecosystem I was interested in understanding actions and impact at three levels: *self*—the leader (that's you!); *others*—the people you interact with (team, peers, family members, friends); *system*—the human context in which you are leader-ing (your team, your workplace more broadly, your family, community, the world). I also use the language 'me', 'we' and 'us' to describe these three levels.

Another way to untangle the interconnected dynamics of a system is to look for connecting *themes* between them; for example, in a workplace this could follow the business unit structure, or the functional areas such as marketing, finance or sales. In The Leaders Ecosystem, I focus on the three themes and associated questions that underpin each body of work: *feeling well*—how can we thrive?; *doing well*—how can we sustain high performance?; *leading well*—how can we lead successfully?

When we bring these two organising principles—levels and themes—together, we can explore each of the three themes at each of the three levels and this is exactly what The Leaders Ecosystem has been designed to do. The figure below shows this in detail.

	SELF: 'ME'	OTHERS: 'WE'	SYSTEM: 'US'
LEAD WELL HOW CAN WE LEAD SUCCESSFULLY?	Finding True	The Power of Partnering	Leading Unbound
DO WELL HOW CAN WE SUSTAIN HIGH PERFORMANCE?	Avoiding Avoidance	Amplifying Accountability	The Leverage of Love
FEEL WELL HOW CAN WE THRIVE?	Beyond Resilience	Better Together	Cultures that Count

YOUR PATH THROUGH THE ECOSYSTEM

My hope is that by making the thinking framework that underpins the Ecosystem explicit, you will be able to navigate it more effectively. Here are a few ways you could do that:

- For you personally:

If you are interested in your self-development, you might read the three essays in the Self column—*Beyond Resilience*, *Avoiding Avoidance* and *Finding True*.
- For your team and culture:

If you want to create an ecosystem of thriving, you might read the three Feel Well essays—*Beyond Resilience*, *Better Together* and *Cultures that Count*.
- For increasing your impact as a leader:

If you're keen to expand how you lead, you might choose to read the three essays in the Lead Well theme—*Finding True*, *The Power of Partnering* and *Leading Unbound*.

As you choose where to begin with your journey in the Ecosystem, the critical words are 'relevance' and 'immediacy'. Research suggests that adults learn best by taking a problem-centred, rather than a subject-centred,

approach, and so will you. What problems do you want to solve? Are they at the me, we or us level? What opportunities do you want to embrace? Do they relate to feeling well, doing well or leading well?

The key is that ownership of the process, as well as its outcomes, lies with the learner—and that's you. What does this mean for you? Be clear about what is most relevant to your context and let that be what guides where you choose to go. And if you're unsure, I've developed a short diagnostic to help you identify and prioritise what's most pressing right now. You can access it at theleadersecosystemssurvey.com.

By far the most important thing for you to know is that there is no one right way and certainly no wrong way to journey through the Ecosystem; all of the ideas are useful.

USING THE IDEAS

In 1976, a British statistician named George Box wrote the famous line, 'All models are wrong, some are useful.' His point was that we should focus more on whether something can be applied to everyday life in a useful manner rather than debating endlessly if an answer is correct in all cases. With this in mind, at the end of each essay I've provided two ways for you to remember and apply the key ideas from the topic:

A Thinking Scaffolding

The adult brain has been described as a dynamic, plastic, experience-dependent, social and affective organ that is not just engaged in, but is driving, its own learning. Because of this, the more your brain is proactively involved in its learning, through the self-generation of ideas, strategies and actions, the more effective it becomes.

The thinking framework at the end of each essay is a tool through which to generate this engagement for your brain. Not only do they summarise some of the key ideas in visual form, they do so in a way that invites you to reflect and apply them.

A Guiding Heuristic Question

There are two connected reasons I've included a guiding heuristic question at the end of each essay.

Firstly, in uncertain complex environments, the impacts and consequences of decisions and actions are often unintended, unclear or opaque; we just can't, don't or won't see them. In this kind of context, rules are too narrow and prescriptive to work effectively, so instead we need heuristics. Heuristics are practical guiding principles that that simplify things, help us find clarity in the next steps and make them easier to implement. Because of this they help us solve problems and learn more about ourselves, others and the system and context we're living and leading within.

Second, in my work with leaders and teams, I've found that questions are the quickest, most effective way to get to the heart of the work that needs to be done. Questions are agile, flexible and easy to use. They focus our attention and our conversations, which in turn determines our planning and our actions. They encourage us to pause and ponder, to stay curious and reflective, and to keep exploring and learning.

This is why, as at the end of each essay, I've considered, 'If there were just one question that would help us move towards this idea in our leader-ing—a kind of meta heuristic question—what would it be?' The guiding heuristic question is my answer to that question for each essay. If you remember nothing else, asking and answering the relevant guiding heuristic question will help orient and guide you through complex, challenging situations.

FINAL WORDS

You know that you need to rise up to the leadership challenges and opportunities ahead. You've tried all the traditional ways of leading and feel drained, stressed and frustrated because nothing seems to

be changing for the better. And you're being asked to do more with less: less time, less money, and less support. You're burnt out and your people are too.

It feels impossible.

I get it. As someone who has been a leader and spent the last fifteen years researching processes, frameworks and models that explain how we can more effectively create and sustain change, I understand why what worked before isn't working any more. We need new ideas, tools and frameworks that don't ask us to grit our teeth, push through and ride out the storm, but instead help us to navigate the challenges and opportunities we're facing in a different way; one that means we emerge from them better for the experience.

We need new ideas, tools and frameworks that help us navigate the challenges and opportunities we're facing, and emerge from them better for the experience.

Yes, really. It is possible. What it takes is a complete shift in orientation from effortful activation to complex navigation, because there is no silver bullet. There's no 'one thing' that will do everything to meet the demands of the complex reality we're navigating. Which is why as leaders, we need an ecosystem of ideas to meet the constantly shifting demands and priorities of our work.

However you choose to navigate The Leaders Ecosystem, these words from Irish poet David Whyte are true, 'Beginning well or beginning poorly, what is important is simply to begin.'