



**Sometimes, the Only
Way to Lead is to Follow:
A Paradox of Leadership**

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“The leadership dilemma: when you quickly offer the solution, it’s your idea; when they find it themselves, it becomes their truth.”

Piers Fallowfield-Cooper

In leadership, we often picture the leader as the one forging ahead, casting a giant vision and expecting others to follow. From military metaphors to boardroom dynamics, this image of leadership remains dominant: leaders set the pace, others keep up. True leadership however, often requires a subtler approach—leading from behind. It’s a strategy that feels counter-intuitive yet can be key to effective leadership, especially in sensitive, high-stakes situations.

It’s Complicated: The Cost of Being Too Far Ahead

We know leadership isn’t just about charging ahead and expecting others to follow—it’s about pacing yourself alongside the people you lead. The military has a useful analogy for this: if you’re too far ahead of your platoon, you might turn around and find no one there. This distance can be fatal in business, family and any relationship where trust and buy-in are essential.

During the Covid pandemic, Illovo Sugar (the largest sugar producer in Southern Africa) were an essential service. As part of the refining process they make potable alcohol and the need for hand sanitiser was urgent. They decided the priority was to get this product at scale to the people who needed it most, and the only people who had the ability to do that at scale were their FMCG customers. They contacted Unilever and said, “Let’s meet and have a baby.” The R&D labs in Europe said no, they couldn’t make hand sanitiser with the alcohol Illovo had in plentiful volume.

Gavin Dalgleish: ***“I grasped the nettle, sent an email, ‘Look, mate, we can’t let excellent get in the way of good.’ Three hours later they were able to do it.”***

Satya Nadella at Microsoft is a case study in balancing bold strategy with patient leadership. When Nadella became CEO of Microsoft, he was faced with a company in need of transformation. His strategic vision was clear—embracing cloud computing was essential for Microsoft’s future. But Nadella understood that shifting the direction of such a vast organization required more than just bold moves; it needed a fundamental cultural shift as well.

Nadella didn’t simply mandate change from above. Instead, he balanced decisive strategic shifts, like moving Microsoft to the cloud, with patient, deliberate cultural transformation. He fostered a growth mindset across the organization, ensuring that every employee—from senior executives to developers—could adapt and thrive in this new era. Nadella knew that while he had thought about these ideas a hundred times, for many, it was the first time they were hearing them.

Imagine you’re running an 800-metre event, you are on the athletics track but way out in front, in fact you are 350 metres ahead of the pack, so far ahead, the other runners have lost sight of you. Sometimes, leading means pacing yourself to stay within view of your team, ensuring they don’t feel abandoned as they pursue the goal.

By pacing himself and gradually aligning systems, people, and processes, Nadella transformed Microsoft without alienating his team. His leadership was a masterclass in how to lead from both the front and the back—driving a strategic agenda while nurturing an environment where the entire organization could come along on the journey.

Family Dynamics: You know you know best but

This paradox was brought home to me during a conversation with my good friend, Alexander Bello, as we grappled with a common dilemma: caring for ageing parents. Alexander's mother, based in Seoul, had recently undergone back surgery, and as Alexander found himself 5,000 miles away in Dubai, his sister (who had been in Seoul) preparing for an NGO assignment abroad, the pressing question arose: what do we do with Mum?

It's a scenario familiar to many. You have a loved one in need, you see with great clarity the obvious solution, and yet you know at a deep level that charging in and dictating what to do is not going to produce a good outcome. And it's here that the wisdom of leading from behind becomes clear.

Alexander and I (from my own experience with an ageing parent) both knew that the best way to help his mother was not by pushing a solution onto her. The solution—whether moving to a different home, hiring care, or something else—had to come from her. If he tried to impose his own ideas, no matter how well-researched or logical, it would only remain an opinion. **It's a classic leadership dilemma: when you offer the solution, it's your idea; when they find it themselves, it becomes their truth.**

The same applies in any organisation. As a leader, you might have a clear vision, but if your team hasn't arrived at the same conclusion, pushing too hard too soon can alienate them. The real challenge is not about having the right answers, but about bringing others to those answers in their own time.

The Tension of Holding Back: When Leadership Feels Counter-intuitive

One of the greatest tensions leaders face when adopting a 'lead from behind' approach is the instinctive need to act decisively and immediately. In moments of crisis or high-pressure environments, leaders often feel compelled to step in, take charge, and offer solutions. However, this can alienate the very people they are trying to help, as they haven't been given the time or space to arrive at the decision themselves.

When a leader stays at the back, they can provide encouragement to those who may struggle to keep pace or who doubt the direction. It's hard to hide at the back when the leader is just over your shoulder, offering a gentle nudge forward. By resisting the urge to leap ahead, leaders make time to understand the context and create a more sustainable, self-sufficient culture—one where the team is empowered to act, rather than reliant on constant direction. In ambiguous situations, effective leaders are willing to follow scouts, trail blazers and risk-takers who can help navigate uncertain terrain.

“A leader is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realising that all along they're being directed from behind.”

Nelson Mandela.

This tension can be frustrating. When you see a clear path forward and know what must be done, it's difficult to resist pushing the solution. The challenge lies in pacing your leadership with the readiness of your team. Research on **transformational leadership** supports this: leaders who practice patience and self-restraint cultivate stronger teams over time. By resisting the urge to leap ahead, you make time to understand the context and create a more sustainable, self-sufficient culture—one where your team is empowered to act, rather than reliant on you for constant direction.

It's all About Context: Knowing When to Direct or Support

But how do you know when to lead and when to follow?

When deciding whether to lead or follow, and whether to use a directive or supportive leadership style, context is key. Some are obvious, others less so...

When to lead from the front:

- In crisis or emergency situations requiring quick decisions
- When there's a lack of clear direction and someone needs to step up
- When you have relevant expertise or experience that others lack
- When you see an opportunity to make a positive impact that others haven't recognized
- If you are in a 'command and control' organisation - because the system will be waiting for instructions otherwise nothing happens
- Compliance and safety issues

When to follow: (which is probably more than now)

- When someone else has more relevant expertise or experience
- When you're new to a team or organisation and still learning
- When someone else is already leading effectively
- When you can learn and grow by supporting another's leadership

The concept of **Directive vs. Supportive Leadership** was elegantly explored in the work of **John Heron**, a notable figure in humanistic psychology. Heron's **Six Category Intervention Analysis** provides a framework for understanding how leaders interact with their teams¹.

But You Still Need Trust: It Arrives on Foot, Leaves on Horseback

As the Dutch proverb goes (though the Chinese lay claim to it too), *"Trust arrives on foot and leaves on horseback."* In leadership, trust is not a given; it is something painstakingly built. Therapists and coaches often say, "Once you have rapport, you can say or do anything." Without rapport, even the best advice will fall on deaf ears. The same applies in leadership: if your team does not trust you, no matter how brilliant your strategy, they simply won't follow.

How Do You Lead Without Imposing?

This is where the real art of leadership comes into play. Whether it's a team at work or a family member in a vulnerable situation, the question isn't just, 'what's the right thing to do?' It's how can I help them realise the right thing to do?

¹ Heron, J. (1999). *The Complete Facilitator's Handbook*. Kogan Page.

Leadership requires patience, active listening and the ability to read the signals without jumping in too soon. It's about being a sheep dog—moving alongside your people, gently nudging them in the right direction without scaring them off.

In my friend Alexander's case, it meant having conversations with his mother, understanding her thoughts and concerns, and allowing her to reach the conclusion on her own. Instead of swooping in with the perfect solution, he held back. He followed her thinking, subtly guiding her, and when she finally reached a decision, she had full ownership over it. What could have been a moment of tension became a shared understanding. The decision wasn't imposed—it was discovered.

Leading Through Patience and Alignment

In both personal and professional leadership, success often comes not from giving answers, but from asking the right questions and creating an environment where others can reach the solution. It's the art of leading without leading.

By following someone else's thought process, you ensure that when the time comes, they are ready to act. In business, this means understanding where your team is in their thinking and gently guiding them towards the goal without forcing your hand. Timing is everything.

The most profound leaders—those who truly inspire and bring out the best in others—understand that being too far ahead creates disconnection. To truly lead, you must stay close enough to your team to know when they're ready for the next step. Only then can you turn around and find them walking with you.

Leadership as a Journey, not just a Command

The idea that leadership is about charging ahead and expecting others to just follow along may be appealing, but in practice, it's rarely effective. True leadership is about giving a sense of destination, setting the culture 'how we deal with each other around here' and then often guiding from behind, staying in touch with those you lead, and recognising that timing, patience, and shared ownership are what turn opinions into truths.

As we lead—whether in our businesses, our teams, or our families—let's remember the lesson of Alexander and his mother: **the solution that is discovered together is usually far more powerful than the one that's imposed from above.**

Piers in Your Pocket:

Here are four key takeaways from this reflection on leadership:

1. **Follow to Lead:** Don't push solutions; help others discover them. This creates shared ownership and lasting impact.
2. **Stay Close to Your Team:** Keep pace with your team's thinking. If you get too far ahead, you risk losing them.
3. **Patience is a Power:** Leadership isn't about quick answers. It's about timing, listening, and guiding others towards the right decision.
4. **The Sheepdog Approach:** Lead gently, guiding from behind rather than forcing the issue. Your team will be more likely to follow when they feel their voice is part of the solution.
5. **Command or Tempt:** Learn how to select a style that works for the context in which you find yourself. *Sometimes* you might just have to follow.

**"A leader is best when people barely know he exists,
when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say:
we did it ourselves." — Lao Tzu (Founder of Taoism)**

Piers Fallowfield-Cooper works with C-suite leaders and their teams to achieve improved performance, stronger dynamics, and greater personal satisfaction. As the author of *Are You Still the Future?*—a finalist for the Leadership Business Book Awards 2024—Piers guides leaders to stay flexible, read the signals in their systems, and remain relevant at every stage of their leadership journey.

Described by a Number 10 insider as “the anti-establishment, establishment coach,” Piers is widely respected for his wisdom, optimism, and sharp sense of humour.