

A quiet ego can be the leadership upgrade you need

The best leaders are those who transcend their own self-interest. Follow these five steps on the path to transcendent leadership.



November 28, 2024

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What makes a great leader? You may have a whole list of adjectives to answer that question, but in some ways it's the wrong question.

After many years in which the focus was on leaders' star qualities, there's a new dynamic: leaders are now seen less as star players and more as coaches.

In this context, the ideal leader is one who can put ego aside to inspire a team to reach its fullest potential. This entails transformation. And I believe that one overlooked aspect of the influence of the leader-as-coach is the potential to bring about transcendence — a shift from personal fears and concerns to a focus on the collective good.

Transcendence isn't new, of course. It has been a subject of exploration in many disciplines. Traditionally associated with the divine, transcendence today has been shaped by philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists.

The psychologist Abraham Maslow placed it at the top of his hierarchy of needs — a model that has influenced many modern management frameworks.

How can transcendence be integrated into the management process? In a [technical note](#) written with my colleague [Estibalitz Ortiz](#), executive director of the [IESE Executive Coaching Unit](#), and Marc Prado, I consider the potential impact of transcendence on coaching and the implications for leaders. We found that incorporating transcendence offers a powerful lens for fostering deep, sustainable growth in both the leader and in others.

Finding your authentic self in selfless pursuits

In the modern context, transcendence can be thought of in a couple of key ways:

- As representing a *state* of heightened awareness that moves beyond personal concerns to a perspective that is objective and universal.
- As a *process* of a continual search for meaning and values, framed within a temporal and personal narrative.

Both require moving beyond ego to connect with a broader understanding of the world. And this is where the benefits of transcendence are to be found. Research has repeatedly shown that expanding your focus beyond your own interest can significantly boost personal happiness and resilience.

We associate experiences that benefit others with a stronger sense of meaning. The focus shifts from self-preserving emotions — such as fear, anger and anxiety — to more altruistic, empathetic stances. This shift creates positive emotions, which become an impetus for action and are a better use of personal resources.

Transcendence as a lens and a tool for human upgrading

Transcendence serves as both a lens and a tool in coaching and leadership.

- **As a lens**, it provides a framework, enabling individuals to envision future possibilities beyond current limitations and personal concerns. Transcendence offers employees a pathway to overcome defensive mechanisms that can obstruct growth. When we move beyond ego, we are more open and objective in our interactions with the world.
- **As a tool**, transcendence actively engages individuals in [practices that build personal and professional growth](#). Coaching aims to empower people to reshape their personal stories, literally changing the narrative to reinterpret past experiences and envision new possibilities.

5 steps to transcendence

We know through the study of neuroplasticity that our brains continue to change and adapt throughout our lives. Our habits and limitations are not set in stone. Here are some best practices to get started on the path to transcendent leadership.

1. **Identify and acknowledge personal limitations as a first step toward growth.** Recognize limits and begin developing strategies to overcome them. Engaging in honest conversations offers valuable insights into your behaviors and their impact on others, helping to reduce blind spots and clarify misconceptions about the image you project.
2. **Practice [mindfulness](#) to cultivate heightened awareness.** By observing your own thoughts and emotions, you can gain deeper understanding of both yourself and your environment — crucial for making informed decisions. Identifying and labeling thoughts and feelings can significantly reduce their intensity and help stabilize emotional fluctuations.
3. **Take a holistic approach.** Encourage your team to look beyond immediate constraints and envision future possibilities, in order to foster innovation and sustainable success. Leverage strengths while acknowledging and addressing associated weaknesses.
4. **Consider the broader implications and long-term effects of decisions,**

including reflecting on past choices. Flexibility is key — understanding there is no one-size-fits-all solution to success, and that previous strengths may not guarantee future results and may even devolve into limitations.

5. **Embrace a quiet ego.** Transcend self-centered concerns by aligning personal goals with altruistic values, shifting the focus to community, shared purpose and mutual growth. Learn to balance personal fulfillment with organizational well-being.

At a glance:



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