

Leadership Development Starts with Letting Go.

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What if the biggest obstacle to becoming a better leader is everything that made you successful in the first place? Too often, leadership development starts with a predictable prompt:

What do you want or need to learn?

It's a nice question. It feels proactive. It appeals to the growth mindset crowd. But here's the problem: by the time someone's in a leadership role especially a senior one it's not just about learning more. It's about **unlearning**. Letting go. Disentangling your identity from habits that once served you but now quietly sabotage your impact. That's why every leadership training, coaching engagement or development programme should begin with a different question:

What needs to go? The Psychology of Unlearning

Unlearning isn't about forgetting. It's about releasing the assumptions, beliefs and behaviours that are no longer fit for purpose. Think of it as psychological decluttering. Your brain is a pattern recognition machine. And the patterns that helped you survive,

succeed, or feel in control? They're sticky. They show up automatically. Especially under stress. Especially in leadership.

Here's what the research tells us:

- **Cognitive dissonance** (Festinger, 1957) makes it deeply uncomfortable to hold two conflicting beliefs like "I must be in control" and "My team needs autonomy." So we protect old habits to avoid internal friction.
- **The Immunity to Change model** (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) shows how people unconsciously resist growth, even when they're highly motivated, because doing so would threaten their internal identity scaffolding.
- **Habit formation theory** (Wood & Neal, 2007) reminds us that much of leadership behaviour is automatic. Unless disrupted intentionally, we default to what's familiar even when it no longer works.
- **The Peter Principle** (Peter & Hull, 1969) posits that people are promoted to their level of incompetence, because the skills that earned them the role aren't necessarily the ones that will help them succeed in it.

This is why so many leadership programmes fail. They add content on top of outdated operating systems, never addressing what needs uninstalling.

The Four Patterns Leaders Must Unlearn

Unlearning is personal, but some patterns show up again and again. Here are four we regularly see in coaching and development work with leaders.

1. Control equals safety

Micromanagement. Perfectionism. Always having the answer. Control helps us feel competent. But at scale, it erodes trust, slows teams down, and increases cognitive strain for everyone involved.

Studies on **locus of control** (Rotter, 1966) show that those with a high internal locus, while often successful, may overestimate how much influence they truly have, especially in complex systems.

Unlearn: If I don't control it, it will go wrong. **Relearn:** Trust, with clear boundaries, is a form of strategic control.

2. Doing equals value

You were rewarded for being productive. Responsive. Fast. But leadership is less about doing and more about thinking, prioritising and empowering. Busyness is not a badge. Research from **Hallowell (2005)** on "attention deficit trait" suggests that in high-pressure roles, we develop compulsive busyness, mistaking action for effectiveness, ultimately reducing strategic capacity.

Unlearn: My worth is measured in output. **Relearn:** Creating space to think is valuable work.

3. Certainty equals strength

Early in your career, certainty got rewarded, confidence in decisions, clarity in meetings. But the higher up you go, the murkier it gets. Ambiguity is now your co-pilot.

Research into **adaptive leadership** (Heifetz & Linsky) shows that in complex systems, success hinges not on technical expertise but on tolerating uncertainty and leading adaptive responses.

Unlearn: Good leaders always know the answer. **Relearn:** Good leaders can tolerate not knowing and still lead.

4. External validation equals success

Praise from mentors. Promotions. Pleasing stakeholders. But people-pleasing leaders become exhausted, conflicted, and eventually disconnected from their own values.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) reminds us that lasting motivation and psychological wellbeing come from autonomy, competence and relatedness not approval from others.

Unlearn: If everyone's happy, I'm doing it right. **Relearn:** Leadership is service, not performance.

So... How Do You Actually Unlearn?

This isn't just a mindset shift. It's a practice. Here's what works:

- **Create space for reflection**, not just skill-building. Reflection activates the prefrontal cortex the seat of decision-making and behaviour change (Lieberman, 2007).
- **Surface assumptions**. Coaching, journaling, and structured feedback processes like 360s help uncover the unconscious drivers that no longer serve you.
- **Normalise discomfort**. Behavioural change theory (Prochaska & DiClemente) shows that resistance and ambivalence are *necessary* stages in transformation.
- **Celebrate release**, not just achievement. What did you stop doing this quarter?

Growth isn't just about addition. It's about subtraction.

Start with a Cleaner Slate

Too many leadership programmes are like piling new furniture into a house without clearing out the junk. Before you build new habits, strategies or ways of leading, ask: What old behaviours are you clinging to, out of habit or fear? What once made you excellent, but now makes you ineffective? What belief got you here, that might be getting in your way now?

Over to You

What have you had to unlearn in order to lead better?

Whether you're a coach, an L&D lead, or a leader yourself, I'd love to hear: What got left behind? What didn't survive the transition?

Share your reflections or send this to someone who's still carrying outdated habits into a new chapter.

Because great leadership isn't about adding more. It starts with letting go.

Call to Action

If you're designing leadership development for your team, organisation or clients, start with the psychological reality: Real growth doesn't begin with learning. It begins with letting go.

At The Work Psychologists, we design coaching, training and leadership development that addresses both sides of the equation capability and identity.

If you're ready to evolve leadership at a deeper level, we'd love to talk.

Let's rethink leadership development, starting with what needs to go. Explore our services or reach out for a conversation.

Five Key Takeaways:

- Leadership development should start with unlearning, because the behaviours that enabled early success often constrain effectiveness at senior levels.
- Unlearning is psychologically challenging as it threatens identity, reinforces discomfort, and activates deeply ingrained habits.
- Leaders commonly need to release beliefs that control equals safety, busyness equals value, certainty equals strength, and validation equals success.
- As roles become more complex, effective leadership shifts from doing and knowing to reflection, trust, and tolerating uncertainty.
- Sustainable growth comes from intentional subtraction—creating space, embracing discomfort, and letting go of what no longer serves.

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