

# COACHING *for* LEADERS

## **Aligned: Connecting Your True Self with the Leader You're Meant to Be**

*by Hortense le Gentil*

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### **Dave's Reading Highlights**

Have you ever felt like you were on a roll? Everything seems to be going your way. Time slows, and you see clearly. Past the noise and distractions, you're able to zoom in on the essential. You take the perfect action at the perfect time, like Neo effortlessly dodging bullets in *The Matrix*. You instinctively know what to do, and you have the profound feeling that you are on the right path. Perhaps you have even experienced what many athletes describe as being "in the flow" or "in the zone." Surfers catch the perfect wave, and skiers effortlessly navigate challenging slaloms. That state of consciousness where we feel in the groove and perform at the optimal level is not the prerogative of a chosen few but is available to everyone. This experience is the manifestation of what I call alignment. Alignment is the congruence of who you are, what you feel, and what you love on a deep and fundamental level with what you do, what you say, what you envision, and where you are going. Alignment is not about falling in step or conforming to others' expectations, but rather it's about becoming more yourself and, in so doing, transcending what you thought were the limits of your capabilities.

I experienced alignment firsthand as a teenager when I was a competitive show jumper: the perfect communion with my horse, the

clear vision of how to navigate the obstacle course, and the laser focus on what needs to be done—free of the noise of thoughts and doubts. I felt seamless communication with the horse through hands and legs, using anticipation, intuitive agility, and subtle adjustments to stay in perfect balance—producing a sense of ease, clarity, calmness, and effortless power.

There are two kinds of equestrians: those who seek to impose their will onto their horse, muscling their way forward and pulling on the reins; and those who seek to work in harmony and alignment with their horse, cultivating mutual trust, ease, and communication.

Psychiatrist David Hawkins distinguishes force—which he defines as a movement that invariably results in a counterforce—from power, or the ability to inspire others to follow you. Force creates friction, resistance, and polarization, and its impact is therefore limited. Force also inherently creates conflicts and win/lose situations, which are costly. Hawkins argues that power, on the other hand, is like gravity: it moves everything within its field but is itself still. Power arises from meaning and significance, inspiring what is noble and uplifting within human nature. Power generates energy. And power requires alignment.

Bestselling author and leadership consultant Simon Sinek, who has studied how great leaders inspire action, explains the power of “why” through what he calls the “golden circle.”<sup>1</sup> Sinek’s golden circle comprises three concentric parts. The “what”—what you do—is the outer circle. Most people know exactly what they do: they sell computers, for example, or they lead companies. The second level in is the “how”—how you do what you do, and how you do it differently or better than others. Most people and companies communicate by focusing on the “what” and the “how.” They sell computers with more functionality or that are cheaper. CEOs maximize shareholder value. The problem is the “what” and “how” by themselves are not very inspiring. The bull’s-eye at the very center of the golden circle is the “why”—the bigger purpose, the reason why others care. Sinek argues that few people have a good grasp of their “why.” But if they manage to identify this wider vision and connect it with the “how” and the

“what,” they are more likely to inspire others to follow. This is because the “why” appeals to the non-verbal part of our brain, which involves our feelings, memories, motivation, and behavior. “People don’t buy what you do,” Sinek concludes. “They buy why you do it.”

So, let me ask you again: why do you do what you do? What makes you get out of bed in the morning? What drives you to keep going when confronted with obstacles or setbacks? What’s your “why”? Perhaps you’re not clear yet. Stay with it. Mull over it. If you have not thought about it for a while—or ever—it may take time to get clarity. Hold on to these questions as you go through the next chapters: while you work on your alignment from additional angles, you’re likely to glean more clues to help you zoom in on your “why.”

So, whom do you admire? Who were your heroes or role models ten, twenty, or thirty years ago? And, more importantly, why? What about their attitude, qualities, values, or achievements do you most admire?

Fictional characters work just as well. Who’s your favorite character from a novel or movie? Perhaps you value the kind of dogged determination that fuels Sylvester Stallone’s Rocky Balboa or the idealism of Robert Jordan, the hero of Ernest Hemingway’s novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. If people don’t do it for you, period, despair not. Many roads lead to Rome. Think of colors, animals, trees, flowers, waterways, or countries. Which is your favorite? Go with the first answer that pops into your head. Then, as you would with a human role models, be very specific on why. It is the significance you associate with your choices that reveals something about you, your values, and who you truly are.

When it comes to delineating who we truly are, peripheral approaches are often far more enlightening than direct ones.

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Can you identify major turning points in your life? Moments when your path veered in a different direction, due either to events beyond

your control or decisions you made? To paraphrase Peter Drucker, tell me what you value, and I might believe you. But show me the twists and turns of your life and I'll show you what you really value. It is not the narratives we tell ourselves and others that are the best signposts to who we truly are, but rather it is the sum of our experiences and our actions.

“Finding alignment is not about becoming someone else. It is about connecting with the best version of the leader that already exists within you.”

The same can be said of beliefs. Think of them like muscles. If you've been running all your life, your legs will be in good shape, but your arms might be on the weak side. One day you decide that you'd like to develop upperbody strength. What can you do? You can start doing push-ups. If you do them every day, your muscles gradually grow stronger. Just as you can develop killer biceps by exercising those specific muscles, you can train your brain by creating new neural connections. By rewiring your brain, you have the power to replace limiting beliefs with more supportive ones. This is like upgrading your own operating system: changing your beliefs allows you to change your behavior and your outcomes.

Albert Einstein referred to the intuitive mind as “a sacred gift” and the rational mind as “a faithful servant.” He remarked, “We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.” Formal education indeed puts enormous emphasis on cultivating reasoning and analytical abilities. We're groomed to trust data, analysis, and hard proof. As a result, we come to disregard our intuition, or at least to relegate it to a back seat. Yet leaders have to rely on intuition to make better, more aligned decisions when facing complicated choices. Why? Because analysis and reason, while highly useful, have their own limitations. They rely on existing knowledge, linear processes, and what can be measured. The future, however, is made of that which we cannot yet be certain. Information is imperfect and incomplete—or overwhelming. Intuition, on the other hand, is about lightning speed, lateral connections, and complexity, which turn out to be very useful when making complicated decisions.

Scientific experiments have confirmed that while conscious deliberation produces better outcomes for simple choices, complex decisions involving multiple factors are better served by subconscious deliberation while one's attention is directed elsewhere—taking a mental step back and letting the intuitive mind do the heavy lifting.

How much do you rely on your intuition when making decisions? Do you trust it? Are you able to tap into it, setting aside your conscious deliberation when you want to? The more you become aware of your intuition and learn to trust it, the more it has a chance to develop. Think of it as another form of brain rewiring, and flex these neural pathways.

So, first ask yourself: does my environment give me energy, or drain it away from me? Does it facilitate or hinder my inner alignment, feeling like wind at my back or in my face?

This takes practice and instinct, as communication can get distorted when you're in charge. Employees tend to tell their bosses what they want to hear and do things they believe will make their leaders happy. This often results in actions beyond what leaders intend, a situation organizational psychologist and bestselling author Robert Sutton calls "executive magnification." Sutton tells the story of an executive who innocently asked why there was a new door in a room. His team took it as a criticism and promptly plastered and painted over it. The executive had to clarify that he had not meant it as a criticism, and the door reappeared. Similarly, the CEO of a retail chain who had complained about a rude clerk found out two years later that, unbeknownst to him, his words had resulted in a costly campaign to improve employee courtesy—a campaign he'd never wanted in the first place.

"The primary responsibility of managers is to care about the success and well-being of their people," says Adam Grant, bestselling author and organizational psychologist at the Wharton School. "If you don't have time to talk individually each week with each of your direct

reports, you have too many direct reports.”<sup>8</sup> Getting to know your team this way allows you to foster a sense of belonging, to spot outliers, and to better understand the human resources you can work with—all of which facilitates team alignment.

Marshall Goldsmith argues that to be effective in today’s and tomorrow’s business environments, leaders must increasingly take on the role of facilitators, rather than experts telling people what to do and how to do it.

In a study conducted by the Harvard Business Review, CEOs who had been in office for a while revealed that their number one regret was not setting high enough standards in selecting direct reports. When they had taken on the role of CEO, they focused too much on the present and not enough on the future: they therefore relied on people who were qualified for managing the status quo but not always capable of helping the company leap to the next level.

Yvon Chouinard, the founder of outdoor clothing brand Patagonia, is a master at letting go. In fact, he spends five months of the year out of the office. From June to November, he’s off in Jackson Hole, fishing every day and pursuing his passion for the outdoors. He calls in only three or four times during his absence. “People know that if the warehouse burns down, don’t call me. What can I do? You know what to do,” he says. “Ant colonies don’t have bosses. Everybody knows what their job is and they get the job done.” Chouinard’s view is that top-down management takes a tremendous amount of effort, and he instituted what he thinks is a better structure: “What we decided to do is just hire motivated, young, independent people and leave them alone.” The company’s policy is, when the surf comes up, people can drop work and go surfing—as long as the job gets done. Would that work everywhere? No, Chouinard argues, because it relies on finding the right people from the very beginning. In fact, a psychologist who studied Patagonia employees concluded that they are so independent that they would be unemployable anywhere else.