

THE TOGUNA®

LEADERSHIP

FIELD GUIDE

NOT(!) A TREE HUGGERS GUIDE
TO LEADING IN A CONNECTED,
AGILE WORLD

EXCERPT

THE CASE FOR TOGUNA LEADERSHIP



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by Andrea Schueller and Martina Weinberger

**'If leadership books solved any leadership problems
we would not have the leadership crisis we're facing today.'**

(Gianpiero Petriglieri, INSEAD Professor, at Martina's 20-year reunion speech.)

Quite.

So, why do we still bother to commit words to paper?

Because between us we have spent 60 years working in and with organisations and their senior and budding leaders, hearing countless stories from their direct reports. We feel it's time for us to describe what we see working and why that might be, to make success at leading others less random. We'd like to take the concept of leadership down from its lofty heights and up from its mechanistic lows and reframe it as something infinitely doable and vital in these disorienting times that call for an agile and connected workforce.

WHAT IS WORKING?

IMAGINE THE FOLLOWING EXCHANGE

»» HEY JON, DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE? ««

Tom, leader of a team of professionals who are fighting on all fronts to meet the demands of a new client under very challenging timescales, is heading for another very late night, trying to fix some oversights in a proposal that needs to go out first thing the next day.

The last person working on the proposal, Jon, a generally conscientious, experienced team member, is nodding in greeting as he leaves the building, expressing his hope that Tom won't be much longer. Tom beckons him over with a tired but friendly smile: "Hey Jon, do you have a minute?"

»» Tom tells Jon calmly that certain parts of the proposal seem incomplete, leaving him with an unexpected editing job, yet more importantly a sense of wonder how this could have happened. Jon seems puzzled and concerned and asks Tom to point out a passage that illustrates his concerns. Tom does so, and Jon immediately says: "Gosh, I'm ever so sorry. I don't know how it happened, but I forwarded an old version to you. Let me quickly go back to my desk and rectify that and then let's jointly – and very briefly – double-check that I've indeed covered all the bases, as far as you're concerned. I'll then take this home and go through it with a fine-toothed comb before we press 'send' tomorrow – just in case."

»» Tom grins: "I'm glad I asked you directly. Imagine the email I'd have fired off in two hours?"

»» Jon smiles back: "You wouldn't have, that's not your style. What you'd have done is addressed it straight out tomorrow – quite rightly. But then I'd not only have felt stupid for attaching the wrong document, I'd also have felt guilty for ruining your evening – most importantly, I wouldn't have had a chance to iron out the glitch myself."

A mundane situation. A genuine mistake has occurred. But because it occurred close to a deadline and was 'caught' by Tom, it could have led to him questioning Jon's ability and track record, micromanaging him from this point forward. Yet Tom acted in a way that made it easy for Jon to spot and correct the mistake and prove his commitment, and for the relationship to be most likely even stronger than it was. No hard feelings.

Leadership is simple but not easy – because it happens between people

Looking at the example above, leadership is simple, right? Just follow a few basics. Treat others how you'd like to be treated and all that. On paper at least it isn't rocket science. The reality is less straightforward. Imagine if Tom's "Do you have a minute?" had been laced with subdued anger, disappointment, assumptions of a shabby, careless job on Jon's part. Tom could so easily have let his annoyance at this additional headache get in the way of remembering that it was not like Jon to produce something riddled with oversights.

We are constantly in dynamic interactions with others, complex exchanges that hinge on a myriad of data points which our brains process mostly without us being aware of it. In these exchanges something unique is created between people that subsequently either broadens or narrows the pathway towards a relationship. And it is relationships that fuel all the things we so desperately need in modern workplaces: risk-taking, divergent thinking, early discovery of dead ends, quick, fearless execution with a view to learn from the result, whatever that is.

So, if the way you manage such exchanges is dynamic, complex and largely subconscious, just how can you increase the likelihood of getting it right(er) over time?

The ability to 'see' those you aim to lead

What makes the difference is something we can all sense when we're in the presence of it, but find hard to put into words and even harder to teach: Does a leader truly engage with the individuals around them? Do they have the courage to genuinely 'see' each and every one of them?

Think this sounds highly esoteric? It's not.

It's what everybody with leadership aspirations – even if that's only leading clients on a one-to-one basis – has to project within the first couple of minutes of meeting others, whether face to face or virtually. That's how long it takes for people to decide if they feel in safe hands, if they are willing to go on a learning journey with you, making themselves vulnerable and sticking their neck out. It is an impression that leaders then have to keep underpinning with their day-to-day actions, otherwise the initial trust will be revoked. Simple, but not easy.

It's not enough to look people in the eye to make them feel seen and acknowledged. We're talking about a fundamental mind-set that drives behaviour, to the point where it seeps into every nuance of an interaction. People have a very accurate BS detector around this.

BEEING SEEN IS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEED.

Why is it so vital in modern workplaces?

In knowledge companies trying to find solutions for the as yet ill-defined problems of the future, no one person by themselves can or should still call the shots. The days when the heroic leader – equipped with a bigger brain, superior strength and stamina and greater insight – led the troops towards victory are gone. Leadership needs to facilitate connectivity and agility; in other words, leaders need to make sure that the right people think and talk with the right people about the right things in ways that are markedly different to how anybody has thought before. To do that, people need to feel safe: respected, accepted, trusted – seen.

To this end, leaders need to become endlessly curious about the people in their team, helping them answer three fundamental questions that drive short- and long-term engagement and thus performance:

- – Does my contribution matter?
- – Do I (really) belong here? Is this my 'tribe'?
- – (How) will I remain relevant?

Given the eroding certainties around us, exploring answers to these questions is imperative. Because even though we might be fascinated by the big changes organisations face and the possibilities they carry, our psychological makeup leaves us ill-equipped to deal with them unless we have certainty that we will continue contributing, belonging and being relevant – and these days that hinges on individual leaders, no longer on the employing company per se.

The psychological contract between employers and employees has long been eroded across the corporate world. Initially this was driven by the politics of the 80s, with Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US. What followed were labour market reforms across Europe with a global emphasis on free markets – which might have been effective in economic terms, but did not address the psychological needs of humans. Today, even if we do stellar work, keep ourselves at the top of our game and demonstrate readiness to work all hours and travel/move constantly, we are no longer sure to be rewarded with a steady job, regular promotions, pay rises and a sense of belonging to a corporate family. The next restructure or merger could easily mean that our particular services are no longer needed and we are 'free' to 'move on'.

Looking ahead, nothing on the horizon is any easier on the human psyche. We are well and truly entering the global VUCA world, a world in which:

:: many jobs are threatened by Artificial Intelligence

:: processes and whole business models are challenged by digitisation, with jobs moving around the world more easily than ever before, or becoming completely obsolete, whilst the criteria for promotion in flat hierarchies increasingly feel like moveable targets

:: we work in virtual, often cross-functional teams, managed by a remote figure as part of a clever but complex matrix organisation that forces us to conduct meetings staring at each other's pictures and names, talking into our headsets.

In short, all guide ropes and certainties are disappearing. We simply don't know what is coming next.

With this bigger context in mind, let us look at the day-to-day reality most people in the corporate world face.

We are meant to be self-empowering, self-accountable, self-motivating. That can feel like constant trial and error. We are asked to be agile, yet we quickly find ourselves slapped down if we go 'too far' or in the 'wrong' direction (without knowing what the 'right' direction might have been or what 'just far enough' would have looked like). This might be great for some of us: free-spirited entrepreneurs with a plan to do their own thing alongside a few like-minded souls, secure in the knowledge that even if it all goes belly up, they'll learn important life lessons. For most it feels like balancing on a tightrope with a patchy or even non-existent safety net underneath.

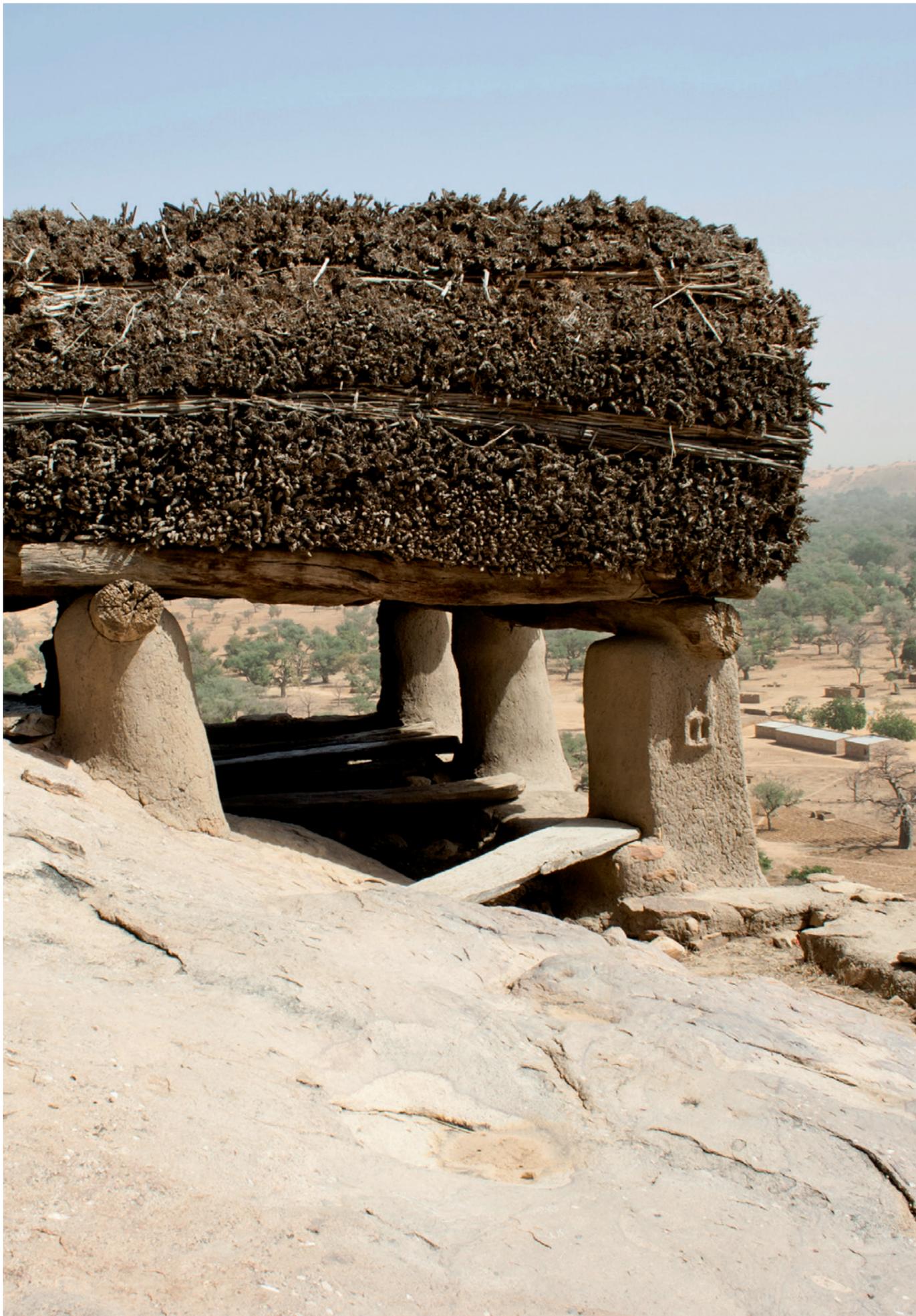
Against this backdrop: What is the role of a leader today?

For us the answer is clear: to see people. To champion, observe and acknowledge their contribution, to give them a sense of belonging and to ensure that they can grow. To take away their sense of being constantly 'on trial' so that they have the courage to challenge beliefs, processes and products, meaning that they can focus on what the world might decide to throw at their organisation in years to come. The agile mantra of 'failing fast' is a fantastic one – in theory. It is less so when you're feeling judged, when you sense that instead of having failed so that you or others can eventually succeed, you are seen as a failure.

Providing some kind of certainty has always been a leader's role, but how do you do this when you are working in shifting sands yourself?

What we see really gifted leaders do is not to pretend that there is certainty where there is none, but instead to create dependable safety zones for others and themselves(!), refugia that are anything but hideaways but places to show up and step up. Places where people can lean into learning and growing with gusto. Most often these won't be physical places but occasions, interactions, simple phone calls, presentations, team meetings and email exchanges. It's psychological, not physical safety we're talking about. A protective cloak, woven from the threads of 'I see you', being put around people. I see you for who you are – meaning that I see you for what you do (your current contribution matters), I see you as essential to our group (you really belong here, this is your tribe) and I see you for what you will grow into (you will remain relevant).

We call these gifted leaders 'Toguna' leaders. Like the Togunas erected in rural Mali to provide a shady communal meeting space away from the glaring heat of the sun, they create psychological shelters for the people around them.



BECOMING A TOGUNA LEADER – THE KEY TO CREATING TOGUNA CONDITIONS

'If the economic, societal and political conditions merely provide freedom from rather than a positive freedom to, if people have lost all the connections that provided safety, the ensuing void makes liberty feel like an unbearable burden.' (Erich Fromm)

In his seminal book *The Fear of Freedom* (1942), psychoanalyst and social psychologist Erich Fromm cites a line from one of Balzac's works: 'Human beings are petrified of loneliness. And the worst kind is psychological loneliness.' Fromm goes on to explain that it's not about being by yourself that scares people, but feeling disconnected from shared ideas, values, a joint cause. That's why monks choosing to live a solitary life don't tend to suffer, and why we invented things like dress codes to signify to others and reassure ourselves that we belong to a specific class or culture.

As early as the 1940s, observing the rise of Fascism in Germany and Italy, Fromm talked about two very different choices that we can make to deal with our ingrained fear of isolation. As we become more of who we are as an individual human being, thus loosening the primary ties to our family and the social circle we were born into, we can either recreate this sense of belonging and safety through conscious, positive interactions and productive work, or succumb to other forces that tell us how to think and act.

If we feel cut off, free floating without anything or anybody to truly hang on to, we're scared. Quite rightly so, as human beings simply aren't designed to survive by themselves. According to Fromm, our ability to reflect on our own life also means that we're capable of realising its finiteness, and just how inconsequential it is likely to be in the greater context.

Now, who can bear to feel constantly under threat and insignificant without booking weekly sessions with their therapist?

Having the courage to seize our individual and collective freedom to, as opposed to freedom from, depends on a set of convictions that are extremely difficult to develop and sustain without regular reinforcement from those around us.

We need to believe that we're:

- - **Capable of creating something of value**
- **Safely embedded within a tribe of our choice (our kind of people)**
- **Connected to a deeper purpose that will ensure that what we do matters in the long run.**

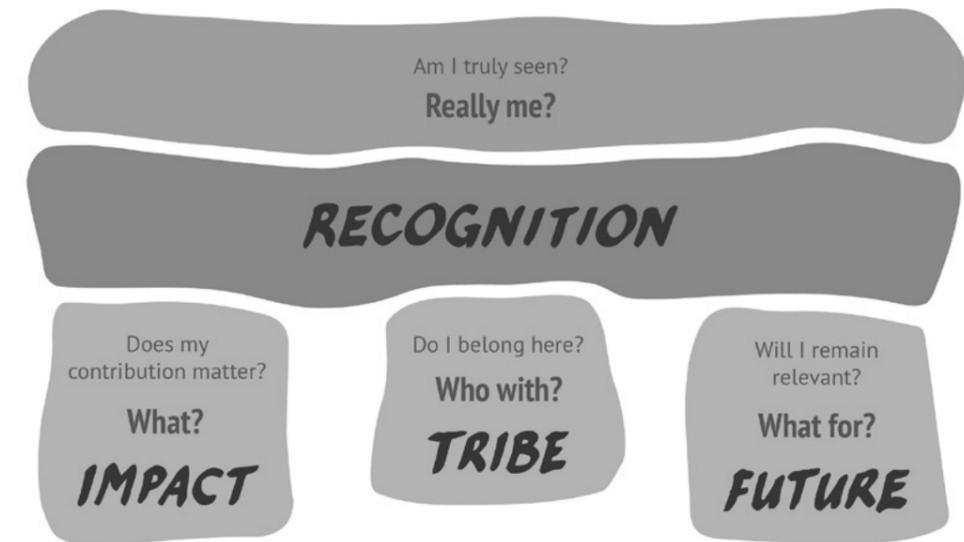
Do you see the connection to the three questions we introduced above?

- - **Does my contribution matter?**
- **Do I (really) belong here? Is this my 'tribe'?**
- **(How) will I remain relevant?**

We believe that the over-arching concept that spans these three aspects is being seen as who you truly are. It is being accepted and acknowledged that makes our freedom to more than merely a temporary, fleeting, contextual state. If we are to feel the opposite of psychological loneliness, it is vital that the answers to the questions above aren't conditional. Our contribution needs to matter beyond a specific project and even if the overall outcome of our efforts was not successful if we are to feel that we have impact. Our place at the tribe's table needs to be guaranteed beyond our perceived usefulness, popularity and other transitory measures. Our effect needs to feel endlessly prolongable into the future – we need to sense that others believe as much as we do that we can and will continue to be relevant.

It is not coincidental that, put together, this concept resembles a Toguna - a sheltered communal space that's still open and thus allows those sheltering inside to see what's happening outside and respond to it. This is a metaphor for what we believe leaders need to provide.

**PUT TOGETHER,
THIS CONCEPT
RESEMBLES A TOGUNA.**



1 AM I TRULY SEEN?

In our model, the primary role of the leader is to offer this layer of protection, a shield from the heat of the corporate sun, i.e. the unrelenting demands on individuals in organisations. In their role as people managers they will significantly contribute to this layer themselves and they will find ways to ensure on behalf of their people that colleagues, client and, superiors outside of the direct reporting line also add to its rich texture and density. To feel truly seen in the workplace means you are acknowledged as an individual with a unique set of strengths, capabilities and delightful quirks rather than a 'human resource'. This requires leaders to consistently display a non-judgemental attitude towards their people.

Practically, this means that they:

- :: consciously set aside their tried and tested classification system that needs only a few quick clues to peg someone as a particular type of person
- :: get endlessly curious, asking questions to learn more, rather than simply to examine, assess or check if others' thinking, way of working, etc. is aligned with theirs
- :: resist the temptation to connect the dots and see patterns prematurely and instead become a collector of individual gem stones first, without considering how they might fit together to form a particular piece of jewellery
- :: allow themselves to be amazed and surprised by others, observing them to find things to praise rather than find fault with
- :: acknowledge that their role is not to 'fix' their direct reports, but to provide conditions in which they can truly grow into themselves and make the most of the freedom to.

2

DOES MY CONTRIBUTION MATTER?

At its heart, this is a question about competence – the perceived level of professionalism and amount of value added. But it is also about providing the person with the means to take control over their impact going forward.

The role of the leader as a people manager is to cast a clear light on what is working in a specific context and why, what is not working or still missing and how it can be changed/acquired, and what all of this might mean for different contexts. In fulfilling this role, they help their direct reports to better manage the present.

Practically, this means that leaders:

- :: demonstrate humility and acknowledge that they are not in possession of any silver bullets, but willing to share their own experiences of what worked and didn't work for the sake of others' learning
- :: recognise that what they see and feel is the result of their own filters rather than the objective truth
- :: aim to provide well-observed, substantiated and mindfully delivered feedback
- :: role-model the skills of reflection in and after action
- :: listen to the outcome of the reflections of their direct reports and provide a sounding board rather than advice, leaving the ownership to act on the reflections firmly with them
- :: embrace the fact that their direct reports have vital insights to share and encourage them to do so regularly and openly.

3

DO I (REALLY) BELONG HERE? IS THIS MY 'TRIBE'?

According to Will Schutz, the creator of a well-known psychometric test measuring the Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation as expressed in our Behaviour (FIRO-B), the need for inclusion is one of the really central desires of human beings. This dates back to the days in the savannah when we wouldn't have stood a chance by ourselves. But it's about more than safety and a higher likelihood to secure sustenance in numbers. As Fromm pointed out, we can easily manage prolonged periods of solitude if we feel connected to others through ideas, ideals and a shared purpose. At the most basic level, feeling included reassures us that our thinking is valid, that we have people who signal at the same wave-length. The purpose leadership fulfils in this context is that of cultivating attachment. It puts those shared ideas, ideals and purpose into words (yes, vision and mission statements) for the overall organisation, but

must also be translated clearly for sub-groups such as departments and teams, be they functional or cross-functional. Yet it's actually less about the what and the why and all about the who with? and how? 'This is the way we do things round here' might get you excited because you feel that's exactly how you would want it to be done if you were in charge, or it might make you feel that others are signalling in code from planet Weird. Cohesive teams have ways of reinforcing the sense of connectedness (often at the risk of repelling people who could prevent them from falling into the traps of group think).

Practically, this means that leaders:

- :: Think long and hard about what their organisation's cultural identity is and how this can be made tangible for people on a day-to-day level. They reassess frequently, to check whether this identity is still valid and genuine, or whether it's an 'us too', following corporate fashions, or a mirage that has long lost any links with reality. They are mindful that cultural identity is often linked to the personalities of the founders and take care that it's broadened out and deepened organically as new people join.
- :: Recruit for cultural fit - and if they purposefully want to add likely 'misfits' to stimulate evolution, they are transparent about it and support them relentlessly.
- :: Frequently take the trouble to put into words what they feel/sense/see that proves to them that their direct report is and keeps being a great addition to the team. What, specifically, is their contribution to this whole that is greater than the sum of its parts? What is sorely missing when they aren't there? This goes way beyond what they do and straight to the heart of their unique contribution.
- :: Ensure that there is plenty of opportunity for their direct reports to witness them cultivating attachment in the team in a tangible way. This might mean small things like how they celebrate successes in line with their team's preferences, or being transparent about their expectations regarding minor areas of team interaction such as response times to emails and calls out of office hours, but it also includes showing respect for and interest in people's life choices, e.g. how much time they devote to family, how they raise their kids, how they reenergise – especially if that's different from their own choices.
- :: Include them relentlessly – even before they formally join the team. Many studies have shown the importance of reaffirming a sense of belonging to one's future employer during onboarding – and that starts from the invitation to the first interview. They also keep including them even after they have gone their separate ways. If they once had the courage to truly see them, why would they stop interacting with them? Why would they stop asking for their opinion? Why would they not put every ounce of effort into ensuring that their transition is as easy as it can be, with honesty, respect and a focus on creating options at all times?

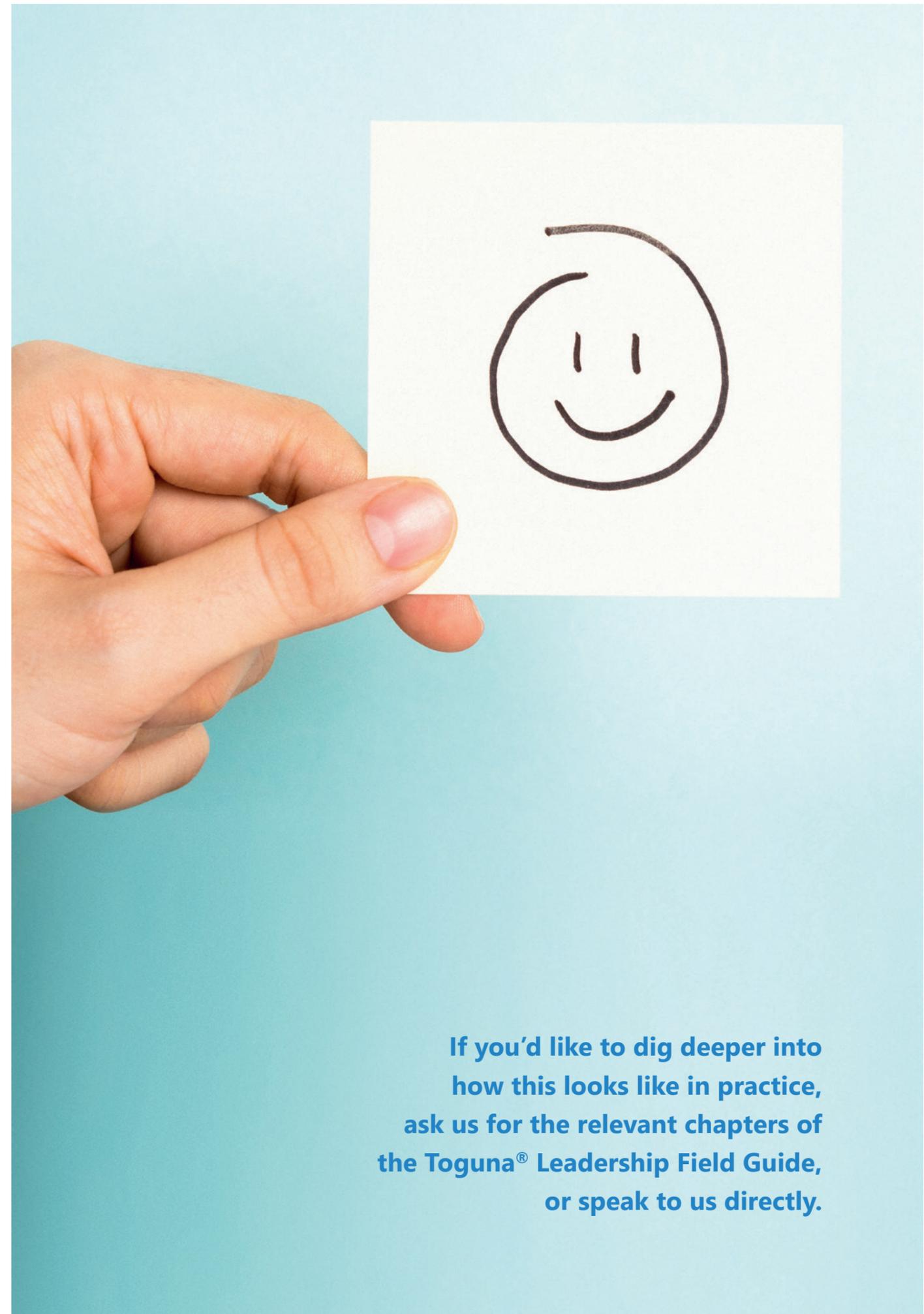
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WILL I REMAIN RELEVANT?

The third Toguna pillar has everything to do with the very modern question of legacy in times when entire industries and their former powerhouses simply disappear – and with them all the blood, sweat and tears employees and management poured into making them the icons they once were. As Fromm pointed out, our ability to reflect on the finiteness of our own existence makes us more eager to be reassured that we are and will keep being relevant.

Practically, this means that leaders:

- ∴ Are hyperaware of what's going on in their industry, markets and the world per se – having their feelers out there on behalf of their direct reports. They shape and utilise their networks and assign times during the week for things like reverse mentoring, immersing themselves in new and different topics in order to answer one key question: what do we see happening out there that is likely to impact on us in five to ten years' time?
- ∴ Change the nature of their development discussions. If they want their people to keep being relevant, they cannot merely focus on what is needed to take the next step in the organisation as it is. Starting from exploring – time and time again – the impact their direct reports want to have, the skills that will get them there and the external challenges and internal developments, they keep in mind that the resulting career strategy must equip their direct reports to become as adaptable as possible. They revise the ratio of talking to listening, ensuring that their direct reports speak at least 80% of the time.
- ∴ Leave people in no doubt about how they can prolong their impact into the future. This means they first have to help their reports to gain clarity on what exactly their impact is right now and what this might mean going forward. They co-create enticing future scenarios and allow contemplations about a future outside of their own organisation.
- ∴ Are prepared to let their best people go – temporarily or for ever. They allow them to take up additional projects that the organisation won't directly benefit from, they ensure that their direct reports sign up for programmes where they can deepen and broaden their skills, they open the doors of their network for them and connect them, they make themselves available as a resource to their friends. This is not a zero-sum game. What goes around, comes around.
- ∴ Role-model continuous and courageous learning. They plunge themselves into the unknown and are prepared to make themselves vulnerable in contexts where they are not and cannot be the experts. They ensure that their people see them fail – and also see them recover and learn from that failure.



If you'd like to dig deeper into how this looks like in practice, ask us for the relevant chapters of the Toguna® Leadership Field Guide, or speak to us directly.

Toguna

LEADERSHIP

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Toguna Leadership creates bespoke learning experiences that give leaders

- :: protected space and time to focus
- :: a deep sense of self-efficacy
- :: a ferocious appetite to act
- :: permission to stumble, laugh and learn
- :: awareness of their personal growth

