



ARTICLE

DECISION FREE SOLUTIONS

AUTHOR  
Jorn Verweij

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# THE ROLE(S) OF LEADERSHIP EXPLAINED

- What Is It, What Does It  
Take, How To Identify A Leader,  
And How To Close The Gender Gap

# The Role(s) of Leadership Explained

*What Is It, What Does It Take, How To Identify a Leader, and How To Close the Gender Gap*

## A Summarising Introduction for Busy Leaders

Existing leadership theories and models are failing today's organisations. Not because they are unsound or necessarily outdated, but because they generally fail to fully take into account how the varying levels of complexity of both an organisation's environment as a whole, and the issues that need to be resolved on a day to day basis, demand different responses from leadership roles.

What is missing is *not* a new theory or model trying to outdo all previous ones. What is missing is *not* a sense-making framework guiding the organisation and leaderships in how to approach decision making based on a situation's level of complexity (the Cynefin framework). What is missing is a *generic model* both for what leadership-roles throughout the organisation need to do, and how to identify those who have the ability to do it successfully.

This article proposes a generic leadership model offering new perspectives on leadership-related findings, and opening up new avenues for leadership-related research:

1. It defines leadership as a role to be found throughout the organisation (not wedded to hierarchy)
2. Explains that the "act of leading" is about creating the conditions to minimising decision making
3. Identifies a "high level of perceptiveness" as the key trait for success in leadership-roles
4. Explains how this level can be assessed through the observation of behavioural characteristics

This article consists out of four parts. The first part defines what "the act of leading" is about. It not merely tries to define leadership, but focusses on what it is that needs to be accomplished. It identifies a leadership-role as follows: "The leadership-role is to create, sustain and communicate the conditions required to achieve the organisational unit's desired outcome at minimal risk."

The second part begins with recognising that those who are in leadership-roles have to adjust their approach based on the level of complexity of the situation, and they have to deal with change (even in what are otherwise stable environments). It identifies the one trait to take on a leadership-role successfully: perceptiveness. As someone's ability to perceive is constant, it follows that not everybody is suited to take on the leadership-role in any given environment. Four leadership-types, and four types of environment, are identified.

The third and most consequential part explains how to assess someone's level of perceptiveness. Someone's ability to perceive can't be measured, but it can be observed. It is explained that someone's ability to perceive shines through in a range of easily observable behavioural characteristics. Other characteristics, which are logically linked, may then be presumed present.

The fourth part explores the implications all of this has on the "gender gap" in leadership positions. This part identifies hierarchical decision making as a *root cause* for the gender gap. It argues that the way to reduce the gender gap is an indirect one: it is what happens when organisations optimally utilise expertise in achieving their organisation goals. As such, the size of the gender gap is a measure of organisational inefficiency.

## The Decision Free Leader — a Generic Leadership Model

The approach of Decision Free Solutions (DFS) — “a generic and systematic approach providing guidelines for new and existing methods to utilise all available expertise to achieve desired outcomes” [1] — consists out of steps, principles, and the role of the “Decision Free Leader” (DFL).

The approach of DFS is built on the premise that in order to achieve desired outcomes at minimal risk, a distinction must be made between decisions which increase risk, and those which don't. As the latter no longer present a choice (what remains is a logical or obvious next step to take), it follows that *decisions are not fully substantiated choices which increase risk*. Decision making is thus to be minimised through the utilisation of expertise.

In the context of organisations, DFS states that for organisations to be successful, they are in need of leadership-roles which ensure that the expertise available to the organisation is optimally utilised. The definition of this role, and the elaborations and implications of its elements, results in a leadership model. This “DFL-model” is a generic non-prescriptive situational leadership model.

The DFL-model is 3-dimensional, considering “leaders,” “followers” and “context” together. It puts central not what leaders are like, or what they do, but what needs to be achieved in leadership-roles throughout the organisation. It provides guidelines also in absence of formal power structures and hierarchy (e.g., as found in some organisations implementing “new ways of working”).

The DFL-model is situational: by analysing the context in which a particular aim needs to be achieved (e.g., in terms of complexity of environment and task, the organisational culture), it can be determined a priori whether the traits (behavioural characteristics) of those taking on leadership-roles are, or are not, essential in being successful in such roles.

Furthermore, the DFL-model logically determines which traits may be required in what context, and how they can be identified through simple observation. This allows for the prediction of performance of both those who take on leadership-roles, and, by extrapolation, of the organisation at large.

The DFL-model is non-prescriptive. Because of the central role context plays, the model is an “umbrella” for a host of contemporary theories of leadership. What is required to take on a leadership-role successfully depends on the particular responsibilities of a leadership-role at a given position, on the resources at hand, and on the environment in which it is to be achieved. Leadership-roles may be transformational, charismatic, authentic, servant, shared, distributed or still something else.

What sets the DFL-model apart from other leadership models, is that it is an integral part of an overarching approach aimed at achieving desired outcomes at minimal risk through the utilisation of expertise. The consequence of which is that the DFL-model comes with guidelines (based on 4 steps and 5 principles) as to what to do to be successful in leadership-roles.

The DFL-model is based on logic, embraces many existing predominantly “2D”-theories, and allows for the prediction of performance. It can be readily researched and tested in practice.

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## Existing Leadership Theories Are Failing Today's Organisations

### When do they actually apply?

Over the years the author has read his pile of "management" books covering a wide range of topics. Among them are classics like "Lean thinking," "The Goal," "Heart of Change," "Thinking fast and slow," "Start with Why" and "Reinventing organisations" [2-7]. They can be considered management literature, for providing the interested reader with profound insights and or a new perspective.

Still many other management books have value and are interesting within a certain, narrower context. But when the topic is "leadership" suddenly the wheels tend come off and with a bump we land at the other end of the management book-spectrum: pulp. Then we, more often than not, hold in our hands something that may be well-written, uplifting, fun and totally identifiable. But ultimately lacking suggestions or guidelines that can be implemented in our own specific situation.

Books on leadership can be thoroughly interesting and thought-provoking. "The art of war," "Losing my virginity," "Primal leadership" and "Shackleton's Way" [8-11] are among those. But you have to look hard to find worthwhile books on leadership. The topic appears to be a *carte blanche* for anybody to turn their personal experiences into "valuable leadership lessons". On HBR.org and LinkedIn clever leadership one-liners are the equivalent of the internet's funny cat videos.

But also more comprehensive leadership theory books, based on research, tend to have bounded applicability. Some studies are only concerned with defining leadership, not with the act of leading. Others only focus on the leaders at the very top of the organisation, ignoring the rest. Or they study leadership in the context of the organisation, but fail to take into account how the varying complexity of both individual situations and the environment as a whole impact the way it is to be lead. Or they implicitly assume that leaders exert power based on their position in the hierarchy.

Today's organisations increasingly have to operate in a very dynamic environment, asking the organisations, and its leaders, very different type of questions very rapidly. Some of these questions demand a "traditional" leadership response. Many others need to, and are best answered within the organisation, not at the top. Then there is a small but growing number of organisations operating *without* a formal hierarchy, where decision making is something to be minimised, and where "leadership" still exists but takes on a different and more fluid form.

Existing leadership theories are failing today's organisations, not because they are unsound, but because too often it is left to the reader to determine under which circumstances they apply.

What is missing is not a new theory trying to outdo all previous ones. What is missing is a generic leadership model which allows one to determine for oneself what to do, and which existing theory may be of help in doing it. This article proposes such a model.

This new perspective on leadership may allow you to identify new tasks and responsibilities in your position, wherever in the organisation that may be, and change the way you lead and or the way you view your leader. It may also be the starting point for a range of new ideas of your own — from how to recruit key personnel to how to best run an organisation, department, team or project based on the environment in which it operates.

## Assessing the validity of the DFL-model: some of its predictions

The DFL-model is based on clear definitions and logic in which context and behavioural characteristics play an important role. The DFL-model is thus able to make predictions. This, in itself, allows for an assessment of the validity and thus usefulness of the DFL-model. Some of the predictions are the following (and their substantiations are found in the rest of the article):

- **In organisations where hierarchical decision making is the norm/strictly adhered to:**
  - Leadership is associated with decision making, and hence favours those with a transactional approach and an appetite for risk (there is no need to substantiate decisions).
  - Those in leadership positions, throughout the organisation, are appointed through decision making (where societal and gender biases concerning leadership are at play) and or on the basis of experience (favouring the privileged who have been handed most opportunities).
  - Because decision making is the leader's prerogative, and decisions don't have to be substantiated, the organisation will not attempt to identify the expertise which would contribute to minimising the risk associated with those decisions.
  - For all the above reasons there will be a *gender gap* (and a *race gap* and a *religion gap*) in leadership positions throughout the organisation. The size of this gap is a measure of organisation *inefficiency*. The greater the gap, the more inefficient the organisation operates.
  - Increasing diversity in leadership positions through rules (e.g., a certain percentage must be female) will *not lessen* the gender gap in leadership positions *throughout the organisation* (the organisation may comply to the rule but not change). Organisational performance thus will not improve in any meaningful way.
- **In high performing organisations which are successful in dynamic environments:**
  - Leadership is associated with creating the right conditions to utilise expertise. This includes creating clarity on the organisation's vision/mission, transparency, cultural safety, compassion, etc. They thus minimise risk the organisational goal is not achieved.
  - Leadership will make decisions when they have to — when there is no time to identify/ utilise expertise, when relevant expertise is not available — and be aware they are taking a risk. When this risk occurs, when more information comes to light, when expertise is identified, leadership will readily reconsider their decision.
  - Those in leadership positions, throughout the organisation, have a high level of perceptiveness — which expresses itself in behavioural characteristics which are in support of an open and safe culture. Expert leadership is the combination of these qualities and experience. This is recognised in the appointment process.
  - Those taking on leadership positions throughout the organisation will, as a group, be a fair representation of the workforce's composition in terms of gender, race and religion (as expertise has no colour, gender, form, name, title or religion).



## The Act of Leading

### What is “leading” about?

The Oxford dictionary defines a leader as “a person who leads or commands a group, organisation or country,” and leadership as “the action of being a leader”. On the one hand this is hard to argue with — CEOs and bosses are generally considered leaders. On the other hand it is also extremely unhelpful. If there is such a thing as a “good” and a “bad” leader, and if we want to talk about “leadership qualities,” we must first establish what it is that leaders should achieve. When does a leader actually lead? The Oxford dictionary defines leading as “to set (a process) in motion”. But what is it that has to be set in motion, and to what aim?

If we take the definition of a “leader” literally, then anybody who leads or commands an organisational unit — of whatever size — is to be called a leader. In practice, many organisations often make a distinction between a “leader” (or leadership) and “managers”. This distinction is supported by some thinkers who believe leaders and managers are somehow discrete entities [12,13], whereas others believe that any categorical distinction is artificial [14, 15]. More importantly, however, this discourse is *entirely irrelevant* to the performance of the organisation itself. What matters is an understanding of what “leading” actually implies.

In leadership literature — a good overview of which is provided by [16] — leadership is usually portrayed as a one- or two-dimensional phenomenon. The focus is often on a person (“the leader”), or the interplay between the leader and its “followers”. What is often missing from leadership models and theories is the environment in which the organisation is to achieve its goals.

In today’s dynamic, interconnected and increasingly complex world, a “leader” staying clear of all things management related is as rare as a “manager” never facing a situation where leadership skills are required. What is more, there is a small but growing number of organisations where there no longer is a hierarchically defined leader. But even in absence of an appointed formal leader, these organisations still harbour people “taking the lead”. Increasingly, leadership models which consider the actions and behaviour of those who are able to exert power based on their position within the organisational hierarchy — often considering only those who are at the very top of the hierarchy — are of little practical use.

Today’s organisations harbour many different “pockets” of expertise and specialisms which all have to collaborate to achieve the organisation’s aim, and which all have their own characteristics and unique challenges. These organisational units have to accomplish tasks in situations which may vary from being transparent to complex or even chaotic. Tasks which are to be non-ambiguous, aligned with achieving the organisational aim, requiring resources, to be performed at minimal risk. None of which simply “happens”.

A generic leadership model does not restrict itself to merely defining “who” the leader is, or “what” leading is to achieve, but also “how” it is actually done. It is to take into consideration that leadership is not be restricted to a person or hierarchical position, that leading is to be seen in the context of achieving an aim, and that this aim is to be achieved in a particular environment.

## The definition of the leadership-role

In leadership literature there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are authors. A comprehensive example of a definition of leadership is “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” [17]. But merely defining the word “leadership” doesn’t say anything about how it is accomplished, or to what aim.

To be able to have a discussion on leadership which is meaningful in the context of everyday situations, we must talk about what needs to be achieved. We must also identify that we are talking not about a type of person, and not about a hierarchical position either. We are talking about a role: the leadership-role.

What this leadership-role looks like, what it takes, and how important it is in any given function depends on many factors. Most importantly, however, this leadership-role must be first defined:

The leadership-role is to create, sustain and communicate the conditions required to achieve the organisational unit’s desired outcome at minimal risk.

Before explaining the various elements of this definition in more detail, the next section will first highlight how this definition based on roles relates to existing leadership research, viewpoints and discussions as well as enduring dilemmas.

## How the definition of leadership-roles relates to existing leadership theories

The definition of the leadership-role provides a perspective on leadership which at times differs radically from existing leadership theories:

- By defining leadership-roles rather than leadership, the responsibilities are no longer anchored to hierarchy or hierarchical position. Leadership-roles may still predominantly be taken up by those in certain hierarchical positions, but the definition allows for leadership-roles also in absence of hierarchy or other formal structures (e.g., in organisations implementing self-management).
- The former is made possible because of the underlying paradigm shift: those taking on leadership-roles are not to make decisions, but to ensure that decision making is minimised (see also the next subsection). Naturally, this paradigm shift also has dramatic consequences with regards to the leadership-style required in such roles (see also the section: “[On gender and leadership](#)”).
- Along the same line, leadership-roles, and their responsibilities, are not just reserved to the top of the hierarchy either. Leadership-roles can, must and are taken up by people throughout the organisation. Roles may also be rotated, or be assumed only in a certain context/situation.
- In the concept of leadership-roles, there is not, by definition, an explicit or implicit “power imbalance”. Power is not a pre-requisite, as the person taking on this role is not trying to control, direct, guide or transform other people or their situation unless this would result in achieving the desired outcome at minimal risk (which is never).



- The definition doesn't care whether employees are appointed in these roles, naturally assume them, be chosen by their peers, are recruited, or even recognised as such. By definition, whomever creates/sustains/communicates the conditions to the purpose as defined is taking on a leadership-role.
- In organisations where "leadership" comes with the job description and or the position in the hierarchy, these "leaders" may not be able to successfully take on the leadership-role. Just because someone's job description is "manager," it does not mean these managers are unable to successfully take on the leadership-role. In other words, in the context of leadership-roles, the popular dichotomy between leaders and managers is not only false, it becomes entirely meaningless.
- By linking the responsibilities to achieving "a desired outcome at minimal risk," the definition not only provides an answer to the more pertinent question "what is good leadership" [18], it also allows for its assessment (i.e., were the conditions to minimise risk in place?).
- By linking the leadership-role to achieving "a desired outcome of the organisational unit," it no longer sets the "leader" apart from the "followers" — they share, and are to achieve, a common goal.
- By linking the leadership-role to creating, sustaining and or communicating "the conditions" for achieving the desired outcome at minimal risk, the definition becomes situational. For example, when the organisation's environment is stable, and where the person taking on the leadership-role is also the expert, a traditional hierarchical form of leadership may be optimal — as the "decisions" made will carry the least amount of risk. In dynamic situations the traditional hierarchical form of leadership will only increase risk (as the expertise required to minimise risk will be distributed, and needs foremost to be identified and utilised). In this situation creating the conditions to allow for self-management may be crucial. Context, alas, is key.
- By linking the leadership-role to the conditions for achieving the desired outcome "of the organisational unit," the activities and also the required skills and experience for a particular role will differ based on how this unit is defined. At the highest organisational level the leadership-role (e.g., CEO) may include communicating the organisation's vision. Within a team (e.g., team leader) it may be pivotal to ensure the desired outcome is understood the same by all involved.
- Leadership-roles are no longer linked to a narrow set of characteristics, or skills, or activities. Traditional and ubiquitous "leadership training programs" assuming leaders are to make decisions and are "in a position of power" become rather futile. The skills and talents needed to take on leadership-roles successfully vary based on context. Yet there is still an argument to be made for the "trait" or "behavioural characteristics" which is essential to take on the leadership-role in especially dynamic situations. This is the topic of the section "[Identifying the right leader](#)".

## The definition of the leadership-role explained

Now a closer look at the various elements of the definition of the leadership-role:

- **The organisational unit** — This merely indicates that those taking on the leadership-role do for a given "unit," be it a team, project, department or the organisation as a whole.

- **Achieve the desired outcome** — This can also be read as achieving the “goal” or “aim” of the organisational unit. The leadership-role is thus directly associated with the organisational context.
- **At minimal risk** — In absence of unlimited resources, and possibly in the presence of competitors, desired outcomes are not merely be achieved “one way or another”. They are to be achieved at minimal risk. There are two types of risk to be minimised: outcome risk and resource risk. The leadership-role concerns itself with minimising the risk the desired outcome will not be (fully) achieved, or will be achieved against (many) more resources than minimally required. It should be noticed that “minimal risk” is not a quantity which can be measured objectively. But the logic implied is that risk is minimised if the available expertise relevant to achieving the desired outcome is optimally utilised. Someone taking on the leadership-role may not have access to the expertise required to fully avoid risk. Many times the desired outcome has to be achieved in situations which cannot be controlled. Some times the desired outcome may even be completely out of the realm of possibilities. But what can be achieved — and assessed — is the optimally utilisation of available expertise (as explained by the approach of Decision Free Solutions [1]).
- **The conditions** — A library can be filled with books written on “the conditions” the leadership-role is to establish for the organisation to be successful. For a certain organisational unit, operating within a certain environment, with a certain established culture, with a collective of people with certain characteristics, a certain book — offering a unique perspective on how to create the conditions for this one particular situation — can be written. Fortunately, the combination of logic and the provided definition of the leadership-role allows for a generic description of what these conditions are. To achieve a desired outcome it must first be transparent to all involved what this outcome is. In order to minimise risk, the experts<sup>1</sup> in achieving this outcome are to be identified. These experts must be able to fully utilise their expertise. This requires that experts and non-experts are able to communicate with each other (to prevent non-experts from feeling the need to control experts), and that “hierarchal decision making” is overcome (to prevent that someone disregards an expert’s substantiated choices merely on the basis of his/her hierarchical position). In the approach of Decision Free Solutions [1] four steps (DICE, [19]) and five principles (TONNNO, [20]) have been identified which comprise the conditions to fully utilise expertise. This approach also identifies that most organisations will not be able to instil these conditions — which collectively constitute a culture — if only for not having sufficient people with the right characteristics to take on the leadership-role in leadership-roles<sup>2</sup>. Being able to positively identify these people is the topic of the next two sections of this article.
- **Create, sustain and communicate** — Here we arrive at the “action” of leading, the process (i.e. creating the right conditions) to be set in motion. It involves ensuring the desired outcome is non-ambiguous, the available relevant expertise both identified and utilised, decision making minimised, and the communication between experts and experts-in-something-else

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Experts’ are defined as those people able to minimise risk in achieving a desired outcome. An expert is not to be confused with a ‘specialist’. A specialist is someone who is very knowledgeable in a certain field, which says nothing about the ability to minimise risk trying to achieve a desired outcome. Experts are able to explain how they will achieve a desired outcome in an easy-to-understand way, without using details or technical language. Specialists tend to speak jargon and often are a poor fit for a leadership-role. “Expertise” can also be the outcome of the combined perceptiveness of a group of people tasked to deal with a particular situation.

<sup>2</sup> As will be argued in the last section, those organisations which have an above average number of women taking up leadership-roles throughout the organisation tend to be organisations which (have the potential to) utilise expertise.

transparent. In almost all instances, especially for leadership-roles at the “top” of an organisation, the focus is on creating, sustaining and communicating a culture (within a team, project, organisation, whatever). A culture which is safe and not only allows, but actively encourages everyone to bring their expertise to the table in order to achieve the desired outcome at minimal risk. If the culture providing these conditions doesn’t exist, it is to be created. Once created it is to be sustained. At all times the leadership-role is to communicate this culture<sup>3</sup>. Someone taking on the leadership-role may not excel at all three elements, but all three elements are crucial<sup>4</sup>.

## An example of an organisation without leadership: Buurtzorg

Buurtzorg is a highly successful organisation that has attracted a lot of attention. It features prominently in Frederic Laloux’ “Reinventing Organisations” and in “Corporate Rebels: Make work more fun” [7,23].

Buurtzorg is a Dutch organisation founded in 2006 whose name translates to “neighbourhood care”. Buurtzorg sets out to provide client care from a holistic perspective, focusing on the client’s autonomy. The organisation employs almost 15.000 nurses — distributed over a 1’000 extremely autonomous self-managing parallel teams, supported by training, coaches and an IT-platform — with an office of no more than 50 people and 20 coaches. Buurtzorg’s results are extremely positive across the board: financially, quality of care (patient satisfaction), and job satisfaction.

Buurtzorg doesn’t have a hierarchy, in the sense that the teams aren’t subordinate to coaches, and coaches not to its CEO. Buurtzorg avoids decision making across the board to not interfere with its employees utilising their expertise to provide care to their patients (as described in more detail in [24]). The office doesn’t come up with rules or protocols, the coaches don’t tell the teams what to do, and the team-meetings are organised such that any informal hierarchy is avoided.

It’s CEO — Jos de Blok — doesn’t consider himself a leader, as he isn’t needed in providing Buurtzorg’s services to their patients. He doesn’t make decisions.

Yet the importance of Jos de Blok for the organisation — which he founded — is hard to overstate. Through interviews, presentations, the way he dresses (no suits), his social media accounts and many other sometimes very subtle ways, too, he communicates and sustains the principles underlying the culture of Buurtzorg, and almost personally embodies it (transparent, easily accessible, open, no-nonsense).

The CEO of Buurtzorg successfully takes on the leadership-role for the entire organisation, the way the coaches do this for the teams, and the “facilitator” does this for his/her colleagues during the team-meeting.

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<sup>3</sup> In the approach of Decision Free Solutions this culture is called the culture of no-decision-making, where a ‘decision’ is identified as a special type of choice: a choice which is not fully substantiated. A choice which, thus, increases risk (see [21]).

<sup>4</sup> Compare with the three proposed leadership styles of “designer,” “steward” and “teacher” as required to build a shared vision and encouraging everyone to pursue its values [22]).

Buurtzorg set out to avoid hierarchical decision making and unnecessary rules and protocols from the very beginning. The resulting structure of self-managing teams is widely venerated. But this doesn't automatically mean that other organisations, pursuing other goals, in other environments, are to shed hierarchy and adopt "self-management" in order to improve performance.

## A shift from "leaders" to "leadership-roles" does not require radical change

Organisations tend to be complex systems, and this often applies also to the environments in which they have to achieve their goals. As "radical" the underlying paradigm shift may appear to be from traditional definitions of "leadership" to "leadership-roles" as proposed here, the transition towards "minimising decision making" isn't. In fact, it is fairly easy, and can be done both locally, gradually and reversibly, and without a need to restructure the organisation<sup>5</sup>.

From complexity theory follows that one shouldn't work towards some idealistic goal, but start with what can be improved in the existing situation. Organisations interested in moving away from hierarchical decision making can do so gradually. Their organisational structure must not be radically changed.

A first step would be to identify which part of the organisation is exposed to the greatest risks. In other words, where in the organisation would optimally utilising expertise have the greatest impact and greatest return? The next step would be identifying all instances of "decision making" — be it hierarchical, or as found in rules, protocols, procedures, checklists, best practices, etc.

The third step is to work towards creating the conditions to optimally utilise expertise. Which begins with defining non-ambiguous desired outcomes, and identifying the expertise relevant to achieve it, and to what extent it is available to the organisation. The approach of Decision Free Solutions [1] provides four steps and five principles, as well as the role of the "Decision Free Leader," to guide this process.

Remains the question: are those who are in hierarchically defined leadership positions also automatically suited to successfully take on leadership-roles? If Jos de Blok would step down, what characteristics to look for in the one to replace him?

## Can everyone take on the leadership-role successfully?

The collective behaviour and attitude of all those who take on the leadership-roles in an organisation determines how it goes about achieving desired outcomes, and how the organisation relates to its employees, its customers and its environment (see [65]).

To take on the leadership-role successfully requires a single trait (or 'ability'). Whether someone possesses this trait, and if so to what degree, cannot be measured, but it can be easily observed. In other words, not everybody can take on the leadership-role in any given situation, but, given the situation, it is easy to identify those who can.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, instead of managing by decision making one can manage by approval (see [37]).

The implicit statement the definition of the leadership-role makes, is that to take on the leadership-role successfully you must be someone who cares. Not just because the one who takes on the leadership-role is to achieve a desired outcome for someone or something else (i.e. the organisational unit). Not just because this person is to create, sustain and communicate the required conditions for others. But because to do all this one has to have a high level of perceptiveness. Those who have a high level of perceptiveness “can’t help” but care — as will be explained in the next section.

Concluding this section a couple of leadership related Q&A (as found in literature) in support of the idea that being able *to identify* those who are most likely to be successful at taking up the leadership-role — regardless of the position in the hierarchy — will have an impact on the organisation’s performance:

- *Does it actually matter who the organisation’s leader (the CEO or boss) is?* The answer is yes [25-27].
- *Is the leader solely responsible for the success of the company?* The answer is no [28].
- *Does the leadership style have an impact on how management performs?* Yes, it does [29].
- *Has research identified an overriding characteristic of what makes a good leader?* No, it hasn’t. It has merely identified that the impact of (the style of) leadership depends on the circumstances the organisation finds itself in (e.g. type of organisation, type of industry, geographical location) [30-32].

## The Leadership Trait

### The constants in a leadership-role

The skills needed to successfully fulfil the leadership-role vary immensely from situation to situation. The need for the leadership-role itself may be nearly absent in managing a well-attuned team of skilled workers operating in a relatively stable environment. It may be front and centre in managing an interdisciplinary project trying to fly to the Moon and back before the end of the decade.

Although there is nothing generic to be said about what someone *has to do* in a leadership-role, most leadership-roles have to deal with change (also in stable environments) and many have to deal with context-specific leadership-styles (especially in dynamic environments). Both of these elements, which will be discussed next, logically point to a single essential leadership trait.

### Those in leadership-roles invariably have to deal with change

The leadership-role concerns itself with creating, sustaining and communicating the required conditions to achieve a desired outcome at minimal risk. In strictly hierarchical organisations (practically all organisations) the leadership-role is to be taken on by leaders, managers, project leaders, team leaders, procurement officers, etc., as they are the ones who are in a position (have the mandate) to act out this role.

Taking on this role means having to deal with changing environments and new unique challenges. Oftentimes the “conditions to achieve a desired outcome at minimal risk” still have to be created and changes will have to be made.

But also when these conditions are more or less in place, there will be change that has to be dealt with. In what are otherwise stable environments anything which is out of the ordinary will be escalated up the hierarchy. Lack of resources, frustrations, disputes, anything that is unclear, ill-defined and or in need of resolution will land at the feet of the one carrying the leadership-role.

Add to this the changes imposed by changing market conditions, competitors, legislation, politics, etc., and the leadership-role clearly requires an ability to deal with change.

### Those in leadership-roles must be aware of context

Practically all organisations, and therefore many who take on leadership-roles, are faced with a mixture of predictable and unpredictable situations. Situations which are routine, or which lie within the field of the organisation’s expertise, tend to be predictable. Situations with many stakeholders in a dynamic environment are almost invariably unpredictable.

The definition of the act of leading applies to both predictable and unpredictable situations. In predictable situations someone in the leadership-role may actually be the expert, or know where the available expertise is to be found. In unpredictable situations “expertise” may be hard to identify or simply not exist. In unpredictable situations a high level of (organisational) perceptiveness



becomes key. Instead of identifying and utilising a few individuals with a high level of perceptiveness, the combined perceptiveness of an entire group may be asked for.

The importance of context in determining how to make sense of a situation is at the core of the Cynefin framework [70-73]. It is an extremely rich and powerful framework, which not only defines different contexts (see Figure 1), but also proposes tools and methods to identify a particular domain and how to best come to a response (the definition of actions and maybe even desired outcomes themselves), and how to navigate boundaries between domains. And still more.

What the Cynefin framework brings across is that, within an organisation, and within a particular leadership-role, the act of leading will require different actions and a different style based on context.

From [73]: “Good leadership requires openness to change on an individual level. Truly adept leaders will know not only how to identify the context they’re working in at any given time but also how to change their behaviour and their decisions to match that context. They also prepare their organisation to understand the different contexts and the conditions for transition between them. Many leaders lead effectively —though usually in only one or two domains (not in all of them) and few, if any, prepare their organisations for diverse contexts.”

In other words, the leadership-role clearly requires an ability to adjust approach and style from one situation to the next.

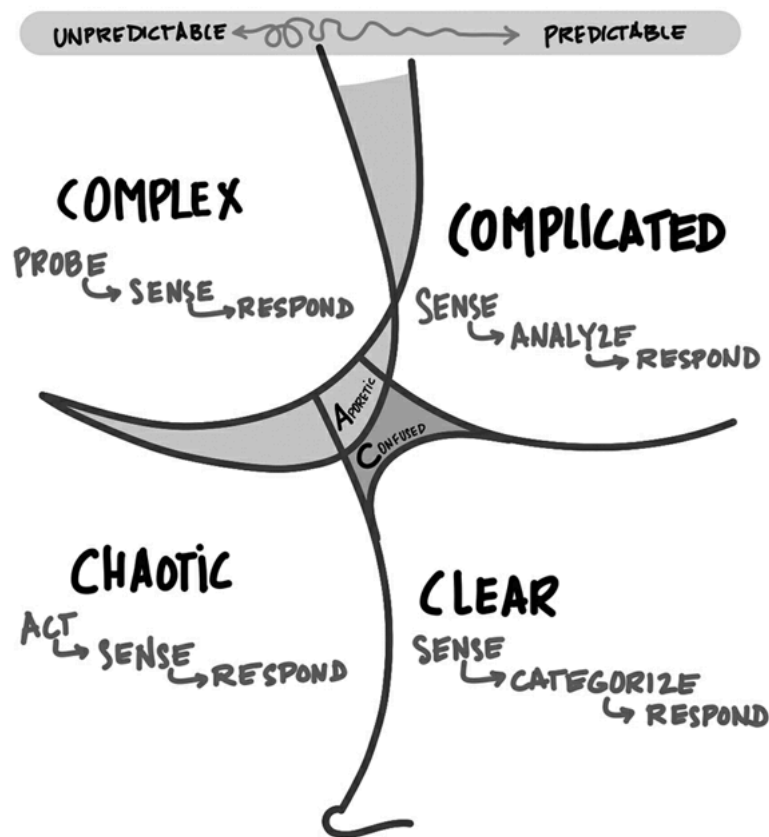


Figure 1. The Cynefin framework (from [70]).

## Each leadership-role asks for something different, and one single trait

Whoever takes on the leadership-role — in whatever organisational unit — will be confronted with change, and many will also have to be flexible in the way they lead. Change creates a new situation, and the impact of this new situation has to be perceived. Context, and changes in context, have to be perceived as well.

The approach of Decision Free Solutions states that, for an organisation to optimally utilise available expertise, it has to [\[1,33\]](#):

- Minimise all types of decision making preventing the use of expertise (hierarchical, and as found in rules, procedures, protocols, checklists and contracts)
- Establish clear communication between experts and non-experts to prevent (the felt need for) mechanisms of control and decision making.

DFS offers guidelines how this is to be achieved by way of four steps, five principles and the Decision Free Leader role. What is to be established is a culture of “no-decision making”.

Whoever takes on the leadership-role — in whatever organisational unit — is to be able to perceive whether this culture is in place, perceive what is shaping this culture, as well as perceive how any change — unexpected or deliberate — impacts this culture.

Whoever takes on the leadership-role — in whatever organisational unit — must not just perceive context and changes therein, but also how these changes may have an impact on achieving the desired outcome.

Whoever takes on the leadership-role — in whatever organisational unit — is to be able to perceive the level of perceptiveness of others around him/her. This is required to be able to align someone’s skills and talents with what is required for a certain task, and to determine what approach or assistance may be needed to then best utilise their expertise.

The single most important trait to take on the leadership-role successfully is a “high level of perceptiveness”.

## Perceptiveness is a precondition for successful leadership

To perceive is “to become aware, to come to realise or understand” (Oxford dictionary). Perception differs from mere observation in that it comes with a certain type of curiosity, a desire to link the observed effect to a cause. In “perceptiveness” it is the elements of “awareness” and “understanding” which are required for the action of leading.

The ability to observe change is not enough. It must be combined with an interest in its possible causes. As only then the impact these changes are likely to have on achieving a desired outcome can be identified, predicted, prepared for and or prevented. Awareness and understanding allow for the assessment of the urgency, as well as the direction that leading has to take.

Perceptiveness alone doesn't automatically make for a good leader. It is merely the starting point for the action of leading itself. Good leadership often also requires experience (having been in

similar situations before) and or specific knowledge on how the organisation ticks. It may at times also be important to be intimately familiar with the organisation's activities and challenges.

That experience, specific knowledge and familiarity with the organisation are, in many situations, crucial for success is supported by plenty of research, see e.g. [28,34,35]. But in almost all situations, the ability to create the conditions to optimally utilise expertise — and thus minimise risk in achieving the desired outcome — stands or falls with the ability to perceive.

The greater the level of perceptiveness, the greater someone's potential to take on the leadership-role. As will be shown, the required level of perceptiveness (as well as that of experience) varies greatly with the characteristics of the environment of the organisational unit. The more change, and the more dynamic this change, the higher the required level of perceptiveness.

There are still a great deal of organisations, and still many more leadership-roles, where a great deal of experience may be equally or more important than perceptiveness. For each leadership-role, however, a certain ability to perceive is required to deal with inevitable change.

### How to identify “perceptiveness”?

Where someone's experience is generally easy to assess, and usually well documented in a curriculum vitae, the same is not true for perceptiveness. Fortunately this problem has a solution. Although someone's “level of perceptiveness” can't be measured, it can be reliably assessed through observation.

In the next section it will be explained how “perceptiveness” expresses itself in a range of behavioural characteristics which can be readily observed. The more observations — and the more consistent and the more “extreme” they are — the greater the reliability of its assessment. These observations allow for the determination of an individual's potential to minimise risk in a particular environment.

This very same principle applies to organisations as a whole as well (see [37]). Based on a range of easy to observe behavioural characteristics of organisations, many of an organisation's future actions — as well as its likelihood of success — can be predicted with a certain degree of likelihood. Observing the behaviour of an organisation's leadership-*team* is often a good and captivating starting point.

## Identifying the Right Leader for a Particular Role

### Perceptiveness, experience and environment

The leadership-role is to create, sustain and communicate the conditions required to achieve the organisational unit's desired outcome at minimal risk. The person who takes on the leadership-role is to combine perceptiveness with experience. The level of perceptiveness and the amount and type of experience required to successfully take on this role varies based on the environment in which the organisational unit operates.

To be able to identify the right person to take on the leadership-role thus requires an assessment of:

- i) the organisational unit's environment, and
- ii) a person's level of perceptiveness and relevant experience within this environment.

In this section — using simple models, diagrams, and logic — it will be explained how the required level of perceptiveness and experience for a particular leadership-role can be identified. This is followed by an explanation of how someone's ability to perceive can be determined through the observation of a range of behavioural characteristics.

This section is very lengthy, and perhaps overlong. But defining the act of leading, and identifying the one single trait required to take on the leadership-role successfully, is of little value if the right leader for a particular role can't be identified *a priori*. Also, the consequences of being able to identify someone's level of perceptiveness go much beyond the topic of leadership. It is a prerequisite in stamping out discrimination and racism in our organisations [69].

### The Event model and predicting outcomes

That perceiving is an essential ability to successfully take on the leadership-role follows logically from a simple model as proposed by Kashiwagi [36]: the Event model (see Figure 2). The Event model — where an "event" is simply anything that takes time — takes as its single assumption the principle of causality. That is to say, nothing happens without being caused. This means that in principle — ruling out divine intervention — an omniscient person could predict the outcome of each and every event.

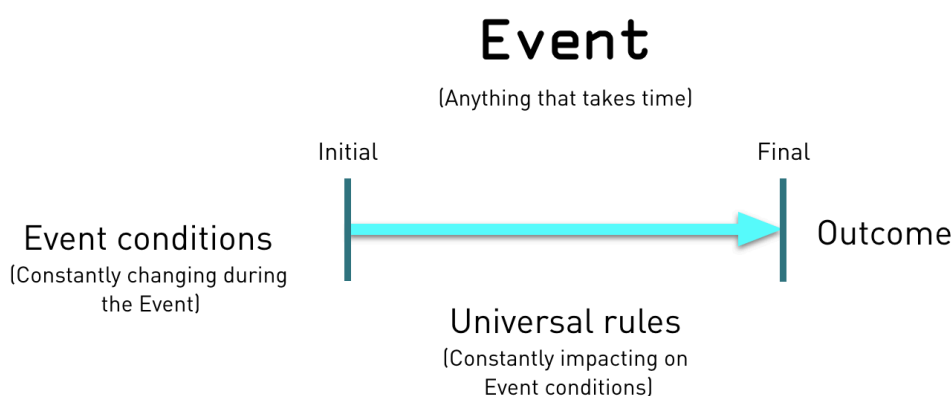


Figure 2. The Event model.

In the Event model any event has, at any given moment, a number of event conditions. At the beginning of the event these are called "initial conditions," at the end of the event "final conditions," or simply "outcome". Throughout the event the conditions are simply there, ready to be perceived.

The Event model states that conditions are impacted upon by so called "universal rules". These rules are — to all intents and purposes — unchanging. Examples are "the Archimedes' principle," and "abusing people at work negatively affects their motivation" (so if people are abused during an event, the event's condition "people's motivation" will change in a predictable way). Some of these rules can be taught (e.g., principles of project management), but most rules affecting everyday events follow from having been in situations where cause and effect relationships were perceived and lessons were learned<sup>6</sup>.

A simple example. Imagine you are a few steps away from someone who is holding a string that is pulled at by a balloon eager to escape. Next you are told that the event is "person lets go of string". Immediately, without thinking, you know the outcome of this event. This is because you perceive all of the relevant initial conditions — person holding a Helium-filled balloon — and you have plenty of experience in similar situations to be familiar with the universal rule at play: if you let go of a Helium-filled balloon, it will rise. And it did. You correctly predicted the future.

But what if you are a few steps away from a person holding a balloon with both hands, the string dangling? Is the balloon filled with Helium or air? When the person lets go, will the balloon rise or fall? You are still an expert — in both gravity and Helium-filled balloons — but you would have to guess the outcome of the event. You may be an expert, but if not all of all of the initial conditions can be perceived, you can't be certain what the event's outcome is.

In organisations, also everyday events tend to be rather complex. It is rather unlikely that all the event's conditions are perceived, and that all relevant universal rules are readily identified. From the Event model follows merely that the more of an event's conditions are perceived, and the more universal rules are known, the greater the likelihood the outcome of the event will be predicted correctly.

## Achieving desired outcomes

The "core-business" of organisations is not guessing the outcome of events, however. It is organising activities (events) to achieve a desired outcome.

In the case of the person about to let go of the balloon, what to do if the desired outcome is: "get hold of the balloon"? Although you can't be sure whether the balloon will rise or fall, you will lunge forward trying to grab the string.

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<sup>6</sup> These "universal rules" are not "laws", and they mustn't be objective and measurable cause-and-effect relationships either. Instead of "A causes B" it would be better to see "universal rules" as "B values A as a precondition". This is, in fact, a metaphysical issue [see [64]]. But the important take-away here is that, in practice, there may be more preconditions than "just" A which result in B. Because of someone's experience this person may recognise a certain situation and predict what will happen next, without this someone being able to identify every single "precondition" and its relative contribution to the predicted outcome.

You will lunge because you are an expert in this situation. Experts, by definition, are able to minimise risk in achieving a desired outcome. They minimise risk, as — based on the perceived conditions and their understanding of the universal rules at play — they know what must be done next.

## Experience versus expertise

When referring to someone's "experience," we generally refer to e.g. the number of years someone has been active in a certain field, or the number of times someone participated in similar type of events. For example, someone has 20 years of experience in the field of project management, or was a project leader in ten different projects.

But someone's experience by and of itself doesn't communicate whether someone is also good at something. It doesn't automatically mean this person will be able to minimise risk when asked to be the project leader in an entirely new situation. What we are really interested in, is the collection of universal rules someone is aware of.

Someone's awareness of universal rules consists out of rules obtained through study as well as through unique personal observations. Studying "project management" you are taught the "universal rules" of how to manage a project. It is a "universal rule" that a project needs some kind of business justification, that roles and responsibilities need to be defined, that uncertainties need to be considered, etc., or otherwise the project may fail. These rules apply to almost all projects and all project leaders better take heed.

But each project takes place in a unique organisation, in a unique environment, with unique conditions and unique universal rules which can't be found in any book. A pending restructuring may make people insecure, a recent leadership change may result in changing priorities, the absence of a clearly stated mission is likely to result in lengthy discussions every step of the way.

The degree to which someone actually perceives these conditions and identifies and assimilates new universal rules is what is of interest. It is the combination of perceptiveness and experience which ultimately determines whether someone is, or may become, an expert.

## Leadership-types and types of environment

An expert-leader — someone who successfully leads the organisational unit to achieve the desired outcome at minimal risk — likewise is to combine perceptiveness with experience. In Figure 3a the various possible combinations are shown in a diagram.

Where it comes to the leadership-role anyone is represented by a point somewhere on this diagram. Any one person combines a certain level of perceptiveness with a certain amount of experience. In this diagram it is assumed that a combination of perceptiveness and experience to the right of the dotted green line ("the arbitrarily drawn expert-leader threshold") is required to be successful at the leadership role.



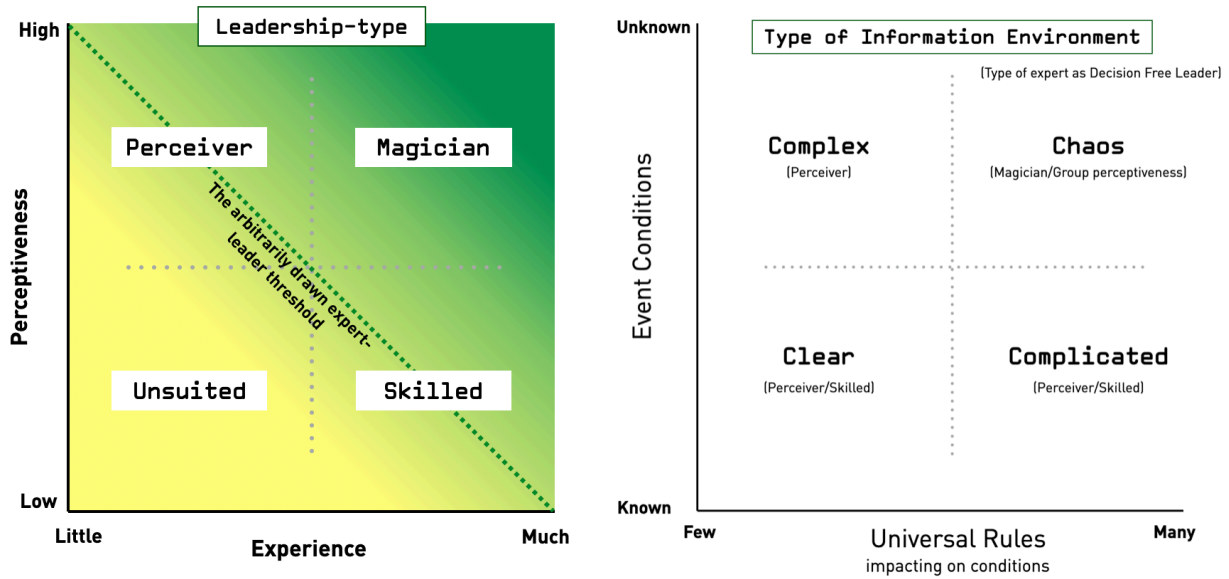


Figure 3a (left). Four leadership-types based on combinations of perceptiveness and experience.

Figure 3b (right). Four types of environments based on combinations of known event conditions and number of universal rules at play.

For each of the four quadrants in Figure 3a a leadership-type has been proposed. For example, those who have a modest level of perceptiveness, but have a lot of experience, are of the leadership-type "Skilled".

Whether a certain leadership-type will be successful in a given organisational unit depends on how dynamic and complex the unit's environment is. The more dynamic, the more event conditions will change (and are thus not "known"). The more complex, the more universal rules will be impacting upon these conditions.

In Figure 3b the various combinations of known event conditions and number of universal rules are shown in a diagram. Each quadrant corresponds to a type of environment and has been labelled<sup>7</sup>.

For example, when many event conditions are unknown, and there are many universal rules which impact these unknown conditions, the environment is labelled "Chaotic".

As is indicated below each environment label in Figure 3b, each organisational unit operating in a certain type of environment requires a certain leadership-type in order to be led successfully. The more dynamic an environment, the more likely event conditions are to change, the greater the importance of someone's perceptiveness. If, on top of changing conditions, there are also a large number of universal rules are at play, the greater the importance of someone's experience becomes

<sup>7</sup> The labels of Clear, Complicated, Complex and Chaos are the same as used in the Cynefin framework (see Figure 1), but how they are defined differs. In the Cynefin framework the domains of Clear and Complicated are constraint and "ordered systems" (cause and effect relationships exist and can be identified). In the Complex domain there are no such simple relationships and what can be identified are patterns. In the domain of Chaos there are no clear cause and effect relationships. Despite these differences, the "overlap" is such that using different labels has been deemed to be only more confusing.

as well. In the environment type “Chaos” — as follows from the Cynefin framework [70-73] — the person taking on the leadership-role is advised to make use of the combined perceptiveness of a group.

It is this combination of perceptiveness and experience — and the required “mix” to take on the leadership-role successfully in a given situation — that makes it impossible to produce blanket statements on what it entails to be a “good leader”. In a “Clear” environment, having considerable experience may go a long way in being a good leader. Experience alone counts for much less, however, when the environment type is “Complex”.

## The practical implication of types of leadership and environments

With the concepts as depicted in these two simple diagrams, a number of leadership-related questions can be answered:

- *Are leaders born?* (See [30]). The answer is yes and no. Yes, as, to all intents and purposes, someone’s level of perceptiveness can be considered a constant. No, as perceptiveness by itself is not enough to be a good leader in all environments.
- *Is a good leader in one situation also a good leader in another situation?* No, as to minimise risk one has to perceive the relevant conditions and be aware of the universal rules impacting upon them. In different sectors, different fields, and different organisations also different universal rules will be at play.
- *Must a good leader also be a “specialist” in the field the organisation is operating in?* If we take the Oxford definition of a specialist (“a person highly skilled in a specific and restricted field”), then it depends on the field. Some organisations operate in an environment so dynamic and so complex that the leader must first and foremost be very perceptive. Such a person can be successful with only a very limited understanding of the organisation’s own expertise. In other organisations, however, a thorough understanding of the organisation’s specialism may be crucial to be able to lead successfully.
- *Does a “specialist” make for a good leader?* Following the definition of “specialist,” then the answer is “usually not”. Whereas a specialist is devoted to a particular subject, an expert minimises risk for others (see also [37]). Those two are not to be confused. The key leadership trait is perceptiveness, not detailed knowledge or experience.

Most importantly, however, the model explains why it is futile to invest in generic programs aimed at preparing employees for leadership positions somewhere within the organisation. To improve an organisation’s performance it is — when it comes to leadership-roles — essential to align someone’s level of perceptiveness and experience with the type of environment in which he/she is most likely to be successful.

Given the “right environment” almost everyone can take on the leadership-role successfully. But to assume that anyone can be trained, motivated or incentivised to become a successful leader in any given environment is, in one word, ill-advised.

## Identifying the level of perceptiveness

As indicated in Figure 3b, the most prevalent leadership-type is “Perceiver”. This is because, also in relatively stable environments, where experience can be more easily built and relied upon, anything that is out of the ordinary will be escalated up the hierarchy and land at the feet of the leadership-role. In virtually all leadership-roles change has to be dealt with, requiring a certain level of perceptiveness. But how to identify someone’s level of perceptiveness?

The concept that the level of perceptiveness can be observed (and future behaviour predicted) was introduced by Kashiwagi [36]. It is explained at length in “How to predict future behaviour of individuals and organisations” [38].

Perceptiveness, as mentioned earlier, differs from mere observation in that it comes with a type of curiosity. A drive to understand, an innate interest in discovering what is cause and what is effect. It is actually the more humane thing to do — not even our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, work with the concept of causality [39].

No one readily perceives all the conditions and all the universal rules which determine the outcome of an event. To become an expert takes learning. This “cycle of learning” — where each cycle can be viewed as an experience in which one or more universal rules are learned — starts with perceiving some of an event’s conditions, or any change therein, and how this affects the outcome of the event.

For example, growing up we learn that there is such a thing as gravity, that glass can break, and that toddler’s have limited control over their limbs. If we see a toddler sitting at the table, next to a glass of water, we know what is likely to happen next. We perceive the conditions and know the universal rules at play.

We are all experts in something in some field or another. And the greater our perceptiveness, the fewer circles are needed to grasp how an event’s outcome is determined by what universal rules impacting upon which conditions. The key observation to make is that someone’s perceptiveness is a trait, and thus reflected in all a person does (and the same goes for organisations, too, see [37]).

As someone’s level of perceptiveness is a trait, this level can be identified by observing all sorts of behavioural characteristics which are linked to perceptiveness. This is what makes identifying perceptiveness a relatively easy thing to do. Some people will move the glass out of the toddler’s reach, or perhaps even replace it with a plastic cup. Some will hold the door open for others, some will dispose of litter that is not their own.

These are very simple examples of perceptiveness in relatively common and familiar situations. People who hold open the door for others are not *therefore* also likely to be successful at the leadership-role — they may still lack the required experience. But the principle holds. So those who don’t hold open the door for others, who don’t move the glass away or pick up litter, are *therefor unlikely* to be strong candidates for successfully taking on the leadership-role in almost any environment.

## Behavioural characteristics of perceivers and non-perceivers

As the ability to perceive lies on a continuous spectrum — from all-perceiving to non-perceiving — the assessment of someone's level of perceptiveness becomes more reliable the more consistent, and the more apparent the observed characteristics are. In practice, just a few observations already suffice to distinguish between perceptive, somewhat perceptive, and non-perceptive individuals.

The behavioural characteristics of either a perceiver or a non-perceiver can be grouped. Some of these grouped characteristics are easy to observe, others are not. Which simply means, as the characteristics are related, that those characteristics which are difficult to identify can be derived.

You may not be able to directly observe whether someone is trustworthy or not, but you can observe whether someone is *likely* to be trustworthy. A series of observations in one situation thus allows you to predict how someone is likely to behave in another situation.

Which behavioural characteristics can be grouped together — and for what reason — can be explained using the Event model. They fall loosely into one of four different “containers”:

- No decision making/Decision making
- No control and influence/Control and influence
- Steadiness/Erratic and emotional
- Caring/Lack of caring.

The Event model simply states that an event's outcome is determined by the event's initial conditions and universal rules impacting upon these conditions. To someone with a high level of perceptiveness — who perceives many of these conditions and has become aware of many of these universal rules — this is simply the way things happen, and “a given”.

In the case of wanting to achieve a desired outcome, this person knows that this desired outcome will only be achieved if the right conditions are in place. Such a person knows that making choices which are not fully substantiated (a.k.a. decisions<sup>8</sup>) means expertise is lacking, and he/she will thus try to avoid having to make them (container 1). Such a person knows that exerting “control and influence” will not change the outcome of an event (container 2). If the conditions are not in place to achieve a particular outcome, then this is simply reality and an opportunity to draw lessons from. Come what may, such a person will behave in an emotional stable way (container 3).

The fourth container of behavioural characteristics is related to “caring”. If you are very perceptive you will be more aware of how someone's environment plays a decisive role in someone's “outcome”. A high level of perceptiveness also makes someone more aware of how so many things are interrelated.

“Caring” — or more broadly “soft skills” — is, at least in part, rooted on this multi-faceted awareness. Behavioural characteristics falling in this container are of vital importance, as the leadership-role is about (the impact of) change and creating conditions and achieving outcomes for others. As stated in [40], “caring” is the key difference between leading and supervising.

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<sup>8</sup> A ‘decision’ — as follows logically from the definition as found in the Oxford dictionary — is a choice which is not fully substantiated to contribute to achieving a desired outcome, see [19]. Decisions always increase risk and should be treated as such.

In Figure 4, for each of the four containers, examples of behavioural characteristics are listed which are associated with a very high level of perceptiveness (Perceiver), as well as a very low level of perceptiveness (Non-Perceiver). These characteristics are thus indicative of whether someone has — or does not have — the potential to successfully take on the leadership-role in a given environment.

PERCEIVER			
No decision making	No control and influence	Steadiness	Caring
Conditions and universal rules determine outcome: utilise everyone's expertise	Understands outcome depends on conditions and can't be forced	Not easily surprised, accepts reality, doesn't feel threatened	Aware of interrelatedness role of environment, own responsibility to contribute
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Always aiming for transparency</li> <li>Identifies decisions as risk</li> <li>Approver and enabler</li> <li>Embraces meritocracy</li> <li>Focus on goal to be achieved</li> <li>Doesn't micro-manage</li> <li>Has overview</li> <li>Welcomes support</li> <li>Encourages creativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doesn't try to persuade</li> <li>Focus on identification of others' skills and talents</li> <li>Focus on alignment</li> <li>Accepts reality</li> <li>Humble</li> <li>Never blames individual</li> <li>Results are produced by culture/entire team</li> <li>Avoids dogged pursuit of unattainable goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Approachable</li> <li>Doesn't compete</li> <li>Doesn't abuse or discriminate</li> <li>Responsible</li> <li>Respectful</li> <li>Honest</li> <li>Informal</li> <li>Thoughtful</li> <li>Quiet</li> <li>Communicates directly</li> <li>Communicates openly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will make others feel at ease</li> <li>Interested in the whole person</li> <li>Achieves work-life balance</li> <li>Volunteers</li> <li>Compassionate</li> <li>Patient</li> <li>Supportive</li> <li>Trustworthy</li> <li>Good listener</li> </ul>
NON-PERCEIVER			
Decision making	Control and influence	Erratic and emotional	Lack of caring
Conditions and universal rules are poorly perceived, event's outcome unclear	Fails to see outcome is pre-determined by conditions and universal rules	Lack of understanding, surprised by behaviour and outcome, insecure	Fails to see interrelatedness, disregard for role of environment, not part of
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likes decision making</li> <li>Belief in "gut instinct"</li> <li>Feels no need to explain decisions</li> <li>Does not mind contradicting oneself</li> <li>Does not prepare for meetings</li> <li>Quick to make up excuses</li> <li>Likes to talk instead of listen</li> <li>Strictly adheres to hierarchy</li> <li>Unable to change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preference for rules, protocols and contracts</li> <li>Values relationships and loyalty over expertise</li> <li>Links performance to the individual</li> <li>Readily apportions blame and praise</li> <li>Belief in incentives</li> <li>Greatly values hierarchy, authority and prestige</li> <li>Disregard for truth</li> <li>Uses information strategically; hidden agenda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Displays abusive behaviour</li> <li>Cause of stress for those around</li> <li>Sees everything as win-lose</li> <li>Sees colleagues as competitors</li> <li>Never responsible when things go wrong</li> <li>Self-centred</li> <li>Boastful</li> <li>Opportunistic</li> <li>Easily hurt/feel threatened</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on self (as opposed to e.g. family)</li> <li>No volunteering work that requires effort</li> <li>Unable to take other people's perspective</li> <li>No interest in other people's problems</li> <li>Not moved by other people's fate</li> <li>Focus on wealth as measure of self-worth</li> <li>Belief that people get what they deserve</li> </ul>

Figure 4. Examples of behavioural characteristics linked to someone with a very high (Perceiver) and very low (Non-Perceiver) level of perceptiveness distributed over the four containers.

The characteristics listed are a somewhat random subset of all of the characteristics that are out there. But each characteristic is logically linked to either a high or low level of perceptiveness<sup>9</sup>.

Someone who would consistently display many or all of the behavioural characteristics in one of the two lists is on the extreme end of the perceptiveness spectrum. For more context and more and other examples, including the behavioural characteristics of organisations, see “How to predict future behaviour of individuals and organisations” [38].

## The evidence linking perceptiveness to good leadership

That someone’s level of perceptiveness can be determined through observation is *not* a new idea [36], but the link between perceptiveness and someone’s potential to be successful in leadership-roles *is*.

Perceptiveness is identified as the one trait essential to fulfil the leadership-role successfully. Success is here defined as safeguarding the conditions to achieve a desired outcome at minimal risk. Which, in turn, requires that this desired outcome is non-ambiguous, that available expertise is aligned with the tasks to be performed to achieve it, and that this expertise can be fully utilised.

Finding evidence in support of “perceptiveness being essential” to take on the leadership-role successfully is non-trivial. The concept is new after all. On top of that, there are few organisations which actually fulfil the needed requirements. Defining unambiguous desired outcomes — for the organisation as well as for all its organisational units — is a rare thing to happen. As is the alignment of expertise with the tasks at hand. Even when this does happen the anachronism that is “hierarchical decision making” readily gets in the way of fully utilising expertise [21,33,42].

There are, however, several management philosophies and approaches which also aim to create the conditions to fully utilise available expertise (and try to overcome, either fully or in part, the challenge hierarchical decision making poses). Examples are Lean [1], Vested outsourcing [43,44], the Best Value Approach [45], and the self-management aspect of teal organisations [7] (such as the management system of Holacracy [46]).

A good place to start looking for evidence for the central role perceptiveness plays would be in those organisations which made these management philosophies work. An analysis of the behavioural characteristics of the people taking on the leadership-roles in these organisations would go a long way in supporting, or refuting, perceptiveness being a key leadership-trait. To the author’s knowledge such an analysis doesn’t yet exist.

Another seemingly logical place to look for evidence is in “transformational leadership” [47,48], and analyse the characteristics of those who are deemed successful in it. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that such leaders demonstrate behaviour which is aligned with perceptiveness. But transformational leadership tends to preoccupy itself merely with the highest leadership-role in the hierarchy, and not with the leadership-roles throughout the organisation. Also, it concerns itself

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<sup>9</sup> It is thus implied that it is extremely unlikely to find people who clearly demonstrate characteristics as listed in the containers for both the Perceiver and Non-perceiver.



more with style rather than with the conscious and successful creation of the conditions to achieve desired goals at minimal risk.

A final approach would be to look at organisations which have been successful over a long time period — say 10 to 15 years — and who not only outperformed the market, but also their competitors. Such an organisation may be assumed to have created the conditions to consistently utilise expertise and minimise risk better than the competition. Studying such organisations one would have to look at a whole range of factors. Not just the characteristics of the leader, but also e.g. the importance of the leadership-role in management, and the characteristics of the people hired to be in that role. As it happens, to a certain degree, such a study exists.

Jim Collins and his team of researchers looked for companies that made a transition from merely good to great companies (as defined by the post-transition cumulative stock returns outperforming the market with at least a factor of three over a fifteen year period) [27]. Having identified eleven such companies (and their less successful counterparts within the same industry) they systematically analysed each case on a range of topics.

The first finding as reported in Chapter 1 concerns leadership: “We were surprised, shocked really, to discover the type of leadership required for turning a good company into a great one. Compared to high-profile leaders with big personalities who make headlines and become celebrities, the good-to-great leaders seem to have come from Mars. Self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy — these leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.”

The second finding stresses the importance of character, as well as alignment: “We expected that good-to-great leaders would begin by setting a new vision and strategy. We found instead that they first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats — and then they figured out where to drive it.” [27]

What is meant here with “the right people” isn’t defined, but in Chapter 3 various descriptions are provided, including the following: “In determining “the right people,” the good-to-great companies placed greater weight on character attributes than on specific educational background, practical skills, specialised knowledge, or work experience. Not that specific knowledge or skills are unimportant, but they viewed these traits as more teachable (or at least learnable), whereas they believed dimensions like character, work ethic, basic intelligence, dedication to fulfilling commitments, and values are more ingrained” [27].

As evidence goes, this is merely an encouragement to design and execute more targeted leadership research.

## **New avenues for leadership research**

The definition of the act of leading, and the pivotal importance attributed to the trait of perceptiveness in doing so successfully, calls for a reinterpretation of existing leadership books and publications. At the same time it opens up an entirely new world for leadership research. For example, on the relevance of someone’s gender, yes/no, in leadership-roles (the topic of the next section). But also research in many other areas.

One of those areas would be the recruitment of people to take on leadership-roles. As an unnamed good-to-great executive stated, “The best hiring decisions often came from people with no industry or business experience. In one case he hired a manager who’d been captured twice during the Second World War and escaped both times. ‘I thought that anyone who could do that shouldn’t have trouble with business’” [27]. To escape an institution designed to keep you incarcerated — and to do so twice — requires a very high level of perceptiveness. Such a person, logically, would be very well suited to take on a leadership-role.

Perhaps, when it comes to applying for leadership-role positions throughout the organisation, the time has come to start rewriting the traditional curriculum vitae and to replace listings of job positions and associated responsibilities by experiences which communicate “level of perceptiveness”.

Another interesting research topic would be ranking the development of a company’s stock value purely based on its leadership’s behavioural characteristics pertaining to perceptiveness. Any correlation found would allow one to also predict a company’s performance going forward, freeing some monkeys from having to throw darts.

## Predicting presidential performance

Any theory worth its salt should be able to produce verifiable predictions. In March 2017, the author published an article which predicted — based on several decades of behavioural characteristics in line with someone who is a non-perceiver (as listed in Figure 3) — that Donald Trump would 1) not change, 2) would not achieve his aims, and 3) would not allow others to achieve them for him either [38].

What may now appear, to some, self-evident, certainly wasn’t at the time. Many respected analysts wrote publications for major news outlets predicting that the experience found in Trump’s cabinet, as well as “the weight of the office,” would blunt Trump’s impulses and cause a change in his style. What’s more, with the presidency, the house and the senate in Republican hands, results were likely to be produced swiftly.

Whether these predictions can actually be “measured” to be correct may be up for debate. But at the very least it is was a *very public* experiment in using observations of behavioural characteristics to predict performance in a leadership-role.

## On Gender and Leadership

### What this section tries to do

The starting point of this section on gender and leadership are psychological differences between “men” and “women” as can be explained from an evolutionary perspective — and what it may or may not imply in relation to the leadership-role.

The reason for writing this section is plain curiosity. The author was curious to see what would happen when applying the concepts of “perceptiveness” and “hierarchical decision making” to an issue which seems to defy resolution — the gender gap in leadership-roles.

### The hypothesis

The hypothesis arrived at is the following: If organisations, across the board, would strive to be *more efficient* in how they utilise their resources to achieve their organisational aims, then one would find that *the relative number of women* who take on leadership-roles throughout organisations *will have increased*.

Another way of formulating more or less the same is the following: organisations which have a similar proportion of women taking up leadership-roles throughout the organisation as the proportion of women in the rest of the organisation, make better use of the expertise available to them than organisations which have a smaller proportion of women taking up leadership-roles.

In short, an organisation’s gender-gap is a measure of organisational efficiency: the greater the gap the poorer its performance.

### The angle: perceptiveness and decision making

Where most books and articles on leadership tend to provide little of value that can be readily implemented in practice, this is even more true for what is written about gender and leadership. Not only is a comprehensive definition of “leadership” usually missing, added to this is an endless array of possible viewpoints and the occasional agenda. A quick read of the articles collected in HBR’s “On Women and Leadership” [49] gives an idea of the width of the spectrum.

This section first looks at whether there is a psychological difference between the sexes with regards to perceptiveness — there is — and then at what this implies for taking on the leadership-role and organisational performance. This section goes on to present hierarchical decision making as a *root cause* for the gender gap in leadership positions, and describes what it would take to close this gap.

## Biological differences and perceptiveness

Based on converging lines of empirical evidence from developmental neuroscience, medical genetics, evolutionary biology, cross-cultural psychology, and new studies of transsexuality, there are significant psychological differences between “men” and “women”. The magnitude of these differences can be classified as varying from small to medium to large [50]. Not all of the psychological differences are relevant when it comes to the topic of leadership. But for some traits a link with the leadership-role may readily be presumed.

The psychological traits more prevalent in “women” are “interpersonal trust,” “conformity,” “sensitivity to negative emotions” (magnitude of difference is small), “empathy” (large) and “interest in people over things” (large).

More prevalent in men are “impulsivity” (small/medium), “risk-taking” (medium), and “task-oriented leadership” (medium) [50].

Several of the more prevalent characteristics for women are associated with behaviour that is related to a higher degree of perceptiveness (see e.g. Figure 3). This is not the case for the more prevalent characteristics for men. This distinction is in support of the statement that “women” (taken as a group) have a higher level of (social) perceptiveness than “men”.

At the same time — as will be explained further below — the traits that are more prevalent in “men” than in “women” are in support of the statement that “men” (taken as a group) are more comfortable at decision making than “women”.

Considering perceptiveness first, what does this difference between men and women — even if the magnitude of the difference in perceptiveness would be small — imply with respect to the leadership-role?

From Figure 2a follows that, when considering “men” and “women” with the same experience, more women than men would be to the right of “the arbitrarily drawn expert-leader threshold”. In other words, **women are (slightly) more likely than men to take on the leadership-role successfully.**

But there is no such thing as having “the same experience”. Experience is merely a concept where “more experience” correlates with “more learning opportunities” to identify universal rules. Men, because of societal biases, may actually be given more opportunities than women.

The more interesting question to ask is whether organisations will do better when they have more women — with, as a group, a higher level of social perceptiveness — in leadership-roles throughout the organisation.

Put somewhat differently, can a higher level of (social) perceptiveness be linked to an improved organisational performance in and of itself.

According to the field of psychological science, it can.

## Perceptiveness and organisational problem solving

In psychological science, organisations are “coordinated social systems operating within a social environment”. Perceiving the social context within an organisation is important for individual performance, but also for organisational success [51]. Logically, given the social nature of organisations, a person’s social skills are very important. This is not new either.

The construct of “social intelligence” was introduced already a century ago [52]. Subsequent attempts to measure social intelligence has merely resulted in identifying a range of variables — such as interpersonal intelligence, social competence, social skill, self-monitoring, emotional intelligence and social perceptiveness [53-59].

When it comes to problem solving within an organisation, the social abilities of “social perceptiveness” and “social affordance” have been identified as being critical to success [60]. Here social perceptiveness is defined as the capacity to be aware of the needs, goals, and feelings of others as well as the greater social environment. Individuals with a high level of social perceptiveness are able to “accurately perceive the social situation and determine the requirements of the social context” [60].

Social affordance is defined as the predisposition to develop social networks in organisations. Those with a high level of social affordance “will develop networks that enable them to cope with the problem solving challenges of their position” [60].

To oversimplify, a high level of social perceptiveness will help in identifying certain organisational problems, and a high level of affordance will help in finding solutions. These two abilities come with their own series of characteristics. Although there is considerable overlap between them, these two abilities must not necessarily be found in the same person.

A high level of social perceptiveness correlates with certain psychological traits which are more prevalent in “women”. As stated, the variables reflecting a high level of social affordance have considerable overlap with those for social perceptiveness — such as apparent sincerity, social astuteness, interpersonal influence, and agreeableness.

Social affordance also correlates with still other variables, such as extraversion and political savviness [60]. Here extraversion is generally considered to be more prevalent in “women,” and political savviness is associated more with “men”.

## Today’s organisations fail to identify women’s suitability for leadership-roles

Female employees make up about 45% of the workforce of the “S&P 500 companies,” yet only 5% of these companies have a female CEO [62]. In Europe, too, women are severely underrepresented in management and decision-making roles, representing on average just 11% of the membership of the governing bodies of the companies included in a large McKinsey study [63].

This study suggested that the companies where women are most strongly represented at board or top-management level are also the companies that perform best. Although this study noted that

there may not be a cause-and-effect relationship, it did use “good business reasons” as an argument to increase women’s participation in business in general, and their presence in the boardrooms and top management in particular (a view upheld by the International Labour Organization, see [67]).

Unfortunately, the measures this study suggested — create transparency by implementing gender diversity KPI’s, implement measures to facilitate the work-life balance, adapt the human resources management process, help women master the dominant codes/nurture their ambition — all have something in common: they miss the larger and more pressing point.

Companies that perform best — who achieve more or all of the company’s goals against less or minimal risk — are, logically, those companies most successful at creating the conditions to optimally utilise available expertise.

The argument presented here is that companies that perform best do not do so because they have women in leadership positions (as somewhat tacitly assumed in [58]). Rather, these companies have more women in leadership positions as a consequence of what makes them perform so well: optimally utilising available expertise.

Companies outperforming their competitors are better at creating the conditions to attract and retain more expertise and or make better use of the expertise available to them — which go hand in hand. These companies have a culture in place that outperforms those of their competitors when it comes to identifying skills and talents in the workforce, and aligning them with the tasks at hand.

Such a culture will result in more women in leadership-roles through two mechanisms. First, the higher degree of social perceptiveness of “women” is an organisational asset in creating and sustaining an inclusive and safe culture which embraces expertise. They will thus be more readily identified and utilised in leadership-roles.

Second, as will be explained next, a culture which utilises the available expertise better will have a much reduced need for “hierarchical decision making” — which is a root cause for the existing gender gap through three different mechanisms.

## Why “Hierarchical decision making” is a root cause of the gender-gap

Almost all organisations are organised in a pyramid-like hierarchical structure. This structure has many organisational advantages. Tragically, almost all organisations also adhere to the concept of hierarchical decision making. Hierarchical decision making, however, is an anachronism which fails both the organisation and its employees.

To allow people, simply based on their position in the hierarchy, to make choices 1) which do not have to be substantiated and 2) which cannot be contested is problematic for three reasons:

- It allows societal biases to enter the organisation — when making decisions, decision making biases affect our judgements (the errors in judgements are intuitive and include gender stereo-types)



- It favours “men” — the combination of hierarchical power and the risk associated with decisions favours psychological tendencies which are more prevalent in men
- It hampers the search for expertise — in absence of a need for substantiation, no attempt at identifying and utilising expertise has to be made

Hierarchical decision making, in short, is a root cause for women being underrepresented in leadership-role positions. For favouring the psychological make up of men, for perpetuating prejudices against women, and for failing to identify the more than relevant expertise women bring to the table.

## How hierarchical decision making puts women at a disadvantage

To explain this requires a paradigm shift of how to look at decisions, which is explained in detail in “On decision making” [21] and “Your organisation upholds racism and discrimination” [69]. In short, and as follows logically from the dictionary definition, a decision is a special type of choice: a choice which is not fully substantiated to contribute to achieving a desired outcome. If a choice can be fully substantiated, then it the logical and obvious thing to do (and no decision is required).

That decisions increase risk is not new. It is, in fact, the *raison d'être* of a “decision making industry” offering books, methods, training and lots of consultancy. The decision making industry recognises that to expect the people in decision-making-positions to routinely make “the right decisions” would be asking for the impossible. Even when all the required information is available to them — which it never is — they are, like the rest of us, only human.

The human brain makes use of a long list of biases — including gender biases — to make sense of the world around us. These biases are at work also when asked to make a decision. What is more, even knowing these biases exist is of little practical help. Humans are incapable of recognising their own biases: the errors in the judgements we make are intuitive [5,66].

In organisations adhering to “hierarchical decision making” many decisions are made which both increase risk and perpetuate gender biases. In practice, hierarchical decision making simply means that someone — purely based on the position within the hierarchy — is entitled to make choices which must not be fully substantiated, which cannot be appealed, and which the organisation meekly accepts as the word of God.

In these organisations the societal biases concerning gender will intuitively and invisibly affect the choices which are made when it comes to recruitment and the selection of people for leadership-roles. In the case of women, it is through “decision making” (as opposed to substantiating the choice for a particular person) that gender stereotypes and prejudices against women leaders get free reign.

Hierarchical decision making thus puts women at a disadvantage because simply by perpetuating gender biases which work against women in leadership positions.

But decision making is also associated with risk. In organisations in which hierarchical decision making is the *lex terrae* — where there is no incentive to identify expertise and to arrive at a shared

understanding of how best to move forward — the desired character traits to be comfortable in decision making positions are “impulsivity,” “risk-taking” and “task-oriented leadership”. Incidentally, these are all traits which are more prevalent, and significantly so, in “men” [45].

In organisations adhering to hierarchical decision making we will find:

1. That talents in the workforce (of which a sizeable part will be women) will not readily be identified and entrusted with more responsibility.
2. That societal biases which work against women in leadership-roles have free reign.
3. That the nature of how the organisation operates — allowing people to make decision based on position without the need to substantiate them — is directly associated with more risk, which in itself makes “men,” as a group, more comfortable with these roles than women.

Examples include pro-male definitions in talent management documents (e.g. the need for “unfailing availability and total geographical mobility”), assigning senior executives to select project leaders (with biases preventing women from increasing their visibility within the organisation), the “paradox of meritocracy” where a purely merit-based performance appraisal only reinforces the existing inequalities in provided opportunities, participation in leadership development programmes offered to those thought to have high potential, workplace norms (“think-manager-think-male” perspective), and job descriptions subtly reinforcing existing gender stereotypes (e.g. ambitious, rational and self-confident, which are more associated with men) [68].

The identification of the role hierarchical decision making plays in creating the gender gap provides a new perspective on existing approaches to close this gap, as well as new starting points for how to hope to begin closing it.

One such starting point is to start identifying “expertise” instead of “experience” (ignoring the importance of someone’s level of perceptiveness in leadership-roles). The emphasis on experience not only strengthens the position of those who already get handed most opportunities, it also puts women who take time to have and look after their family at a structural disadvantage. Or worse: it nudges women — acutely aware of the pivotal need to grab any opportunity their organisation may provide them with — to postpone starting a family, or to minimise the time away from work when they made preferred otherwise.

## To close the gender gap organisations have to become more efficient

### *Many organisations can’t close the gender gap*

For many organisations — and “many” is probably quite the understatement — decision making is not something they actually choose to do. It is something they are forced to do — because of having unclear organisational goals, because of lack of sufficient expertise, because of not actually trying to identify expertise, and because of lacking the culture which is safe and inclusive enough to allow the expertise which is available to be actually utilised.

Consequently, in most organisations there will always be more “men” than “women” in management positions. Because of societal biases, the emphasis on “experience,” and the simple reason that “men” feel more comfortable with the inherent “risk-taking” associated with these positions in these organisations.

Measures which do not take this root cause into account may, through various incentives, end up increasing the number of women in top management positions. But these measures will not affect the number of women in leadership-roles throughout the organisation.

***For other organisations there is an approach that which will close it***

But there are also organisations who do have a choice. Who care about achieving the desired outcome, to whom expertise is available, and who want to fully utilise all this expertise. Which is how these organisations minimise the risk the desired outcome will not be achieved, or against many more resources than actually required.

By overcoming hierarchical decision making, these organisations will automatically contribute to closing the gender gap. According to DFS it is merely logical that such organisations increase the proportion of women finding their way to the boardroom and taking on leadership-roles. That this proportion will, ultimately, be much more similar to the proportion of women in the organisation's general workforce.

When the gender gap in leadership-roles is disproportional to the number of women in the overall workforce — for example when 10% of leadership-roles are taken up by women who make up 40% of the workforce — this is merely a measure of organisational inefficiency. The greater the gap, the more inefficient the organisation is likely to be.

Here we have arrived at the hypothesis posted at the beginning of this section: If organisations, across the board, would be more efficient in how they spend resources to achieve there organisational aims, then one would find that the relative number of women who take on leadership-roles throughout organisations will have increased.

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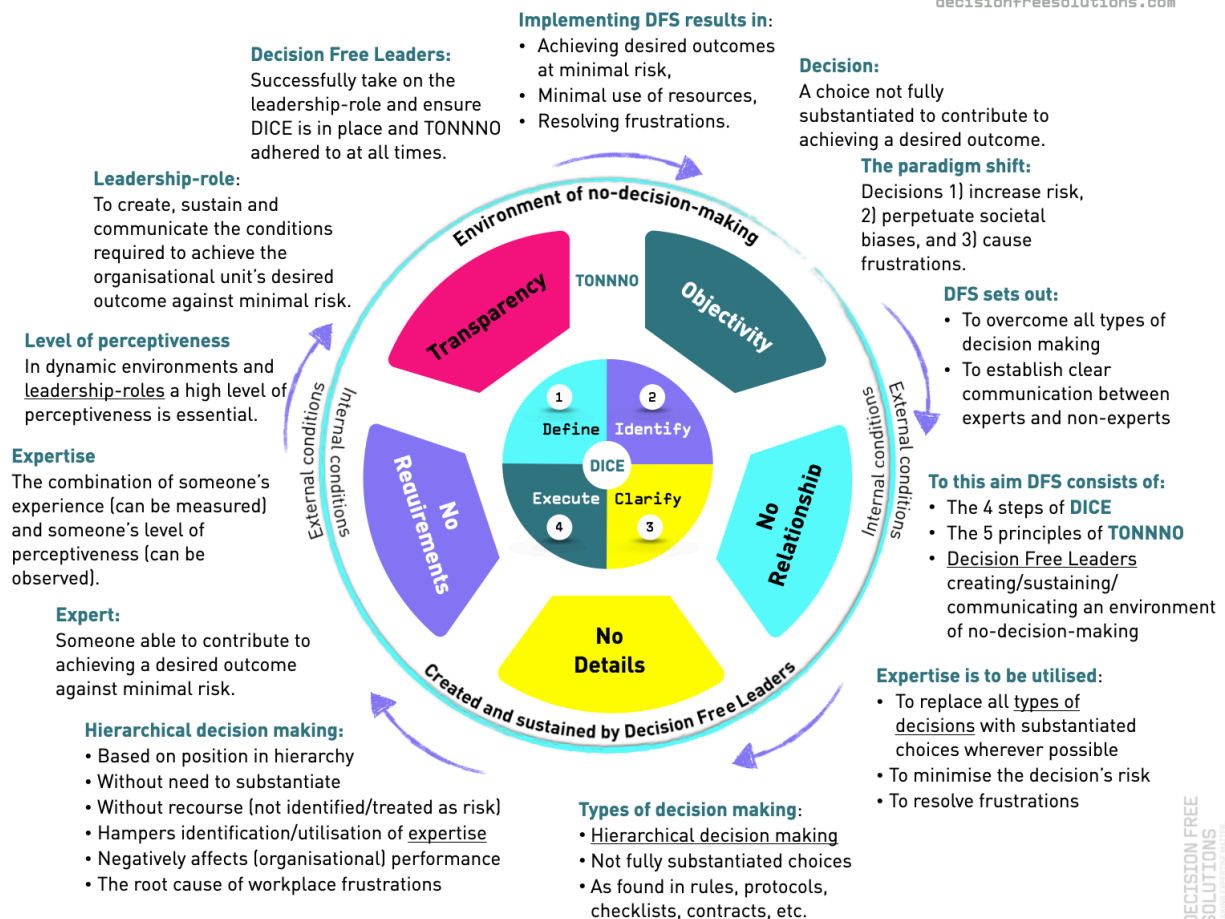
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Decision Free Solutions  
Potgieterlaan 9  
1215 AH, Hilversum  
The Netherlands  
+31 6 538 64545

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[info@decisionfreesolutions.com](mailto:info@decisionfreesolutions.com)  
[www.decisionfreesolutions.com](http://www.decisionfreesolutions.com)