



STEPHEN LOCK COACHING

Free Guide

# The CEO's Essential Guide to Self-Managing Teams

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## Introduction

If you are reading this you must have an inkling. An idea that traditional forms of leadership and management just aren't working any longer. And you'd be right.

This guide is designed to help you quickly understand what's wrong with the current paradigm and what you can do about it.

## Why Am I Giving This Away For Free?

Many of the ideas gathered in this guide changed my life. I don't say that lightly and I mean it literally.

A few years ago I was fortunate enough to study at INSEAD Business School just outside of Paris. While there I was introduced for the first time to ideas of progressive organisations and self-managing teams. I was already very interested in modern leadership techniques and improvement theory, but this was the final piece of the jigsaw.

From that point on, I changed almost everything about the way I worked as a manager and as a leader. I experimented with ideas of giving away my formal authority over things like budgets and decision making. I started to [write about my experiences](#) and slowly became more and more sure that we need new ways of organising and working to help us to thrive in the modern world.

My theories were tested to the limit during the Covid pandemic when the "self-managing" team I had developed became a key part of the UK Government's research response. It was fascinating to see how the efforts we'd put in over a couple of years to modernise our approach to our team-work had rapid impact as soon as they were tested to the limit. These experiences also led directly to me becoming a professional coach. After all, if you stop identifying as a top-down manager, you need a new vocation. Mine, it turns out, is coaching.

And so, I want to share what I can with the world. My life was set on a new course by a few ideas shared by other people. I hope that one or two of the ideas described here might inspire you too.

## Why Do Managers Think The Way Managers Think?

Have you ever stopped to think about why managers think the way they do? Ever wondered where modern management came from? It's not something we ever really question is it?

What if I told you that it all started in the “dark Satanic Mills” of Victorian England.



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Prior to the industrial revolution, there weren't many large organisations. Only really the church and the army had to organise large numbers of men (and they were mostly men). Even so, in the 1850s, the British army had [less than 100,000 recruits](#). By way of comparison, Amazon employs 1.5 million people world-wide today.

This tells us that most people prior to the industrial revolution worked in small organisations. That might be a shop, a small-holding or some other trade that they shared

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with small numbers of people who they knew intimately. Often they would be family members, but certainly with people from neighbouring streets or villages.

Then came the rapid growth of factories and with it the need for a new kind of workforce. Factories needed:

- Large numbers of uneducated labour.
- The ability to mobilise and organise those people.
- People who could perform repetitive tasks.
- Central planning.

With this change came a new class of people. Originally they would have been called “overseers” because they stood on gantries, literally overseeing what happened on the factory floor. They assumed a position of physical hierarchy and control. They were above the working class. (And the factory owners were above the overseers).

In this new world, creativity and initiative were not desired. A good worker was someone who showed up on time, did what they were told, didn’t complain and didn’t question. Discipline was enforced to ensure compliance.

Although most of us no longer work in dark satanic mills, consider how much of the language of that time has echoed down the generations to today. When we think of organisations we automatically think of them as disciplined hierarchies with some people above others. When we think of improving them we think of “efficiency” in the way you can make a production line more efficient.

We also expect managers to “tweak”, to “tune”, to “pull levers” and have “grip”. All of these words come from the days when an overseer would be the one person with the authority to pull the levers that started and stopped the machines.

Over time, people started to think of the organisation itself as a machine. One that could be controlled, improved, made more efficient and measured. And that led to some assumptions about people.

Assumptions that we really ought to question.



## Assumptions About People in This Context

When we think about an organisation as a machine, we start to think of the people who work in it as parts, as cogs, as components. This leads, in the minds of the people higher up the hierarchy, to some significant assumptions about people. They:

- become assets and resources
- are considered lazy and must be watched closely
- are only motivated by money
- always put their own interest first and cannot be trusted
- are not capable of understanding the bigger picture
- don't want to be responsible for their actions.

I am sure you have had managers who treated you like that, haven't you? So, pause for a moment, remember that situation and ask yourself:

- How did that make you feel?
- Do you think of yourself as an asset or a human being?
- Were you more or less motivated when you were treated that way?
- Did you enjoy coming to work at that time?
- Was that when you did your best work?
- What impact did it have on your home life and health?

And finally ask yourself, do you want to make the people you lead or manage feel like that?

## Are We All Like Fish?

One day a couple of fish were swimming along a reef together. After a while they passed a friendly octopus who waved and said, "Beautiful day, isn't the water lovely?" The two fish swam along for a little longer before one fish turned to the other and said, "wait a minute, what's water?" There's a reason why I asked Why Do Managers Think The Way That Managers Think? It's because most of us don't ask that question. We just absorb leadership and management ideas as we go. It's like the water we swim in. And we assume that it has to be that way, but it doesn't. And you are just the sort of person to change it.

# New Ways of Thinking About Organizations

The fact that you are still reading this tells me some beautiful things about you. You are:

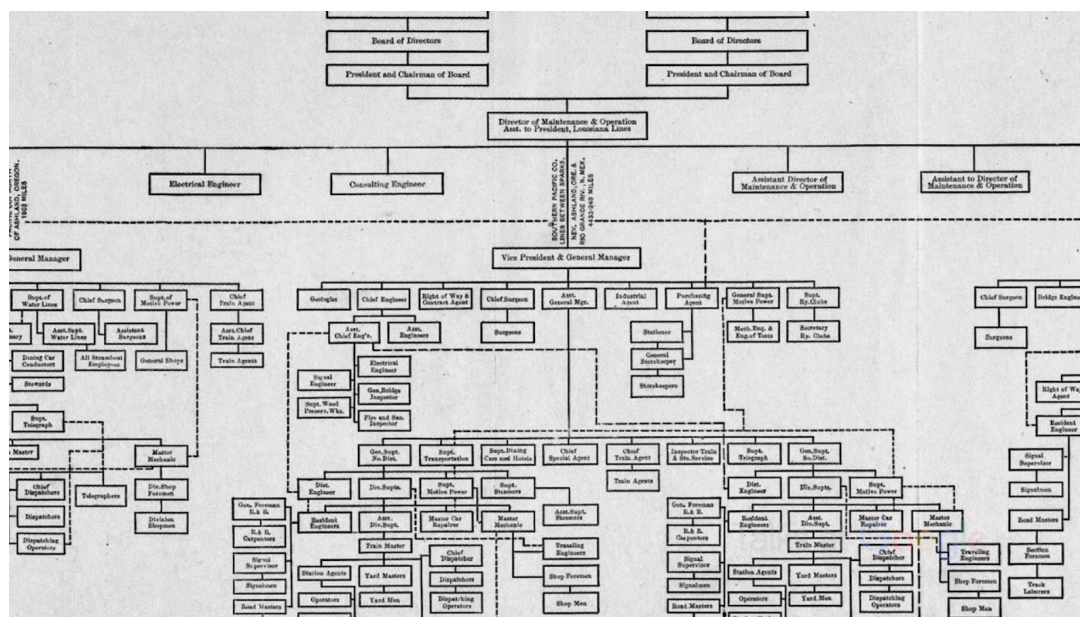
- Curious about new ways of thinking.
- Willing to change.
- Brave enough to consider something new.
- Sensitive enough to realise the old ways don't work anymore.

It is one thing to feel and understand these things, but it is quite another to know what to do about the existing ways of working. The rest of this guide will give you some practical tips to help you on your way. At the end of the guide there are also some sources of [further inspiration](#) and help to let you know that you are not alone on this journey.

## Escaping Machine Thinking

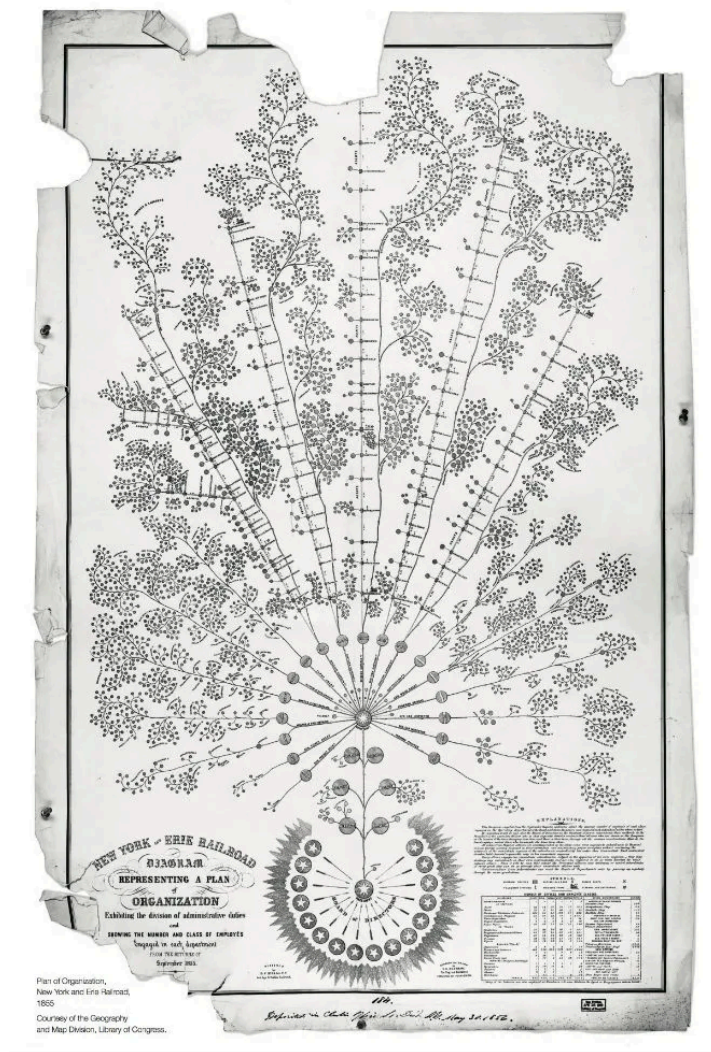
It is helpful to have a language for what we don't want so that we can then step forward and decide what we don't want. Machine thinking is one term that helps us to frame old ways of thinking about organisations.

Here is an example of an early, hierarchical organisational chart.



I bet that all of the organisations you have worked for have had something that looked a bit like this. You don't need to know anything about what this company did to know that the people at the bottom couldn't wander into the office of the people at the top and ask them a question. Charts like this are intended to remind us who we work for and who can (and can't) tell others what to do.

But you don't have to draw organisation charts like this. You can draw them in any number of ways. This next example is generally understood to be the first modern organisational chart. It was drawn by Daniel McCallum, the general manager of the Lake Erie Railroad in the 1850s. It is a masterpiece of design, but it also tells us a lot about the way this general manager saw the people in his company.



All of the circles and links give us an indication that this was a networked organisation - literally in the sense that it was connected by rails - but also conceptually.

When you look at this chart you have a sense that each branch is its own system that is supported by each of the other connected parts.

Also you can see that the individual nodes of the network need to work independently but in support of the whole. The image itself implies that there is trust and expertise distributed across the whole system.

More modern versions of this thinking can be found in concepts like sociocracy and holocracy. But maybe you don't need to do that yet.



Is there any reason why you couldn't draw your existing organisation like this? In a way that recognises interconnectedness, rather than hierarchy?

You probably can do this even without making any changes to governance or team structures. And when you do that, you've taken the first step away from machine thinking.

## **A One Minute Primer on Complexity Theory**

So, at this point, I imagine that I have started to convince your heart that something needs to change. Possibly there is a stirring in your gut. But have I started to convince your mind? Let's see if we can start to shift that too. By thinking about complexity.

Most people use the words "complex" and "complicated" interchangeably. They use them to mean *something that is difficult to understand*. However, system thinking tells us they are different.

For example, building a jumbo jet is complicated. It is really, really complicated, but it is not complex.

Whereas, creating a beautiful garden is complex. It isn't complicated.

So what's the difference? Well an easy way to think about it is to ask yourself, if it broke, could it be fixed? If a jumbo jet broke, a properly trained engineer could get it working again and it would be almost exactly as it was before.

But imagine that you planted a garden and, after a year or two, you found that your potatoes wouldn't grow. So you add some compost and plant some more. This time they still don't grow. So, you test the soil and consider watering strategies and you scratch your head as you stand over the soil.

Just then you notice the sun going behind a line of trees and you realise that they have grown. Your potatoes are no longer getting any sun. That's why they are not thriving.

So you have an answer to your question, but what do you do? Do you move the potato patch or cut down the trees? Whatever you do, unlike the jumbo jet, when you solve the problem you will have a different garden.

So now think about your organisation and the environment it operates in. Is it more like a complicated machine? Or is it like a complex, organic garden?

Is it really a physical thing, with hard lines and boxes, or is it a network of humans?

The answer to that question has profound implications for the way we need to manage and lead. In a complex organisation we need to make sure we don't just look at dashboards of hard data. We need to consider different types of feedback. To listen for signals. To check that the hard data reflects the soft data. To talk to people and to encourage them to talk to one another.

After all, you can only garden by stepping into the garden. There's no point shouting at it from the kitchen window. And your dashboard of potato statistics would have told you nothing about the shade from the trees.

## **This is Not a Niche Concept**

The New Ways of Working that I am pointing to here are not yet the normal paradigm. However, there are signals of change all over the place when you start to look.

One example of this is the Agile movement in the software industry which is littered with the language of tribes and has lots of tools for effective communication and collaboration.

Versions of these ideas are also behind some of the most well known organisations in the world. For example:

- Patagonia is a purpose driven organisation with a mission to "Save Our Home Planet". This mission drives many of the decisions (large and small) made by the company and everyone within it.
- W. L. GORE, the company behind GoreTex fabrics, has a famously unusual corporate structure based on a lattice concept that gives individual teams great autonomy. Effectively the company has no middle managers as a result.
- Haier is the world's number 1 home appliance maker. Haier has been through a few iterations of progressive design but it now embraces the concept of Entrepreneurial

Microenterprises. In other words, rather than being one organisation, it is more like an ecosystem of startups under one banner.

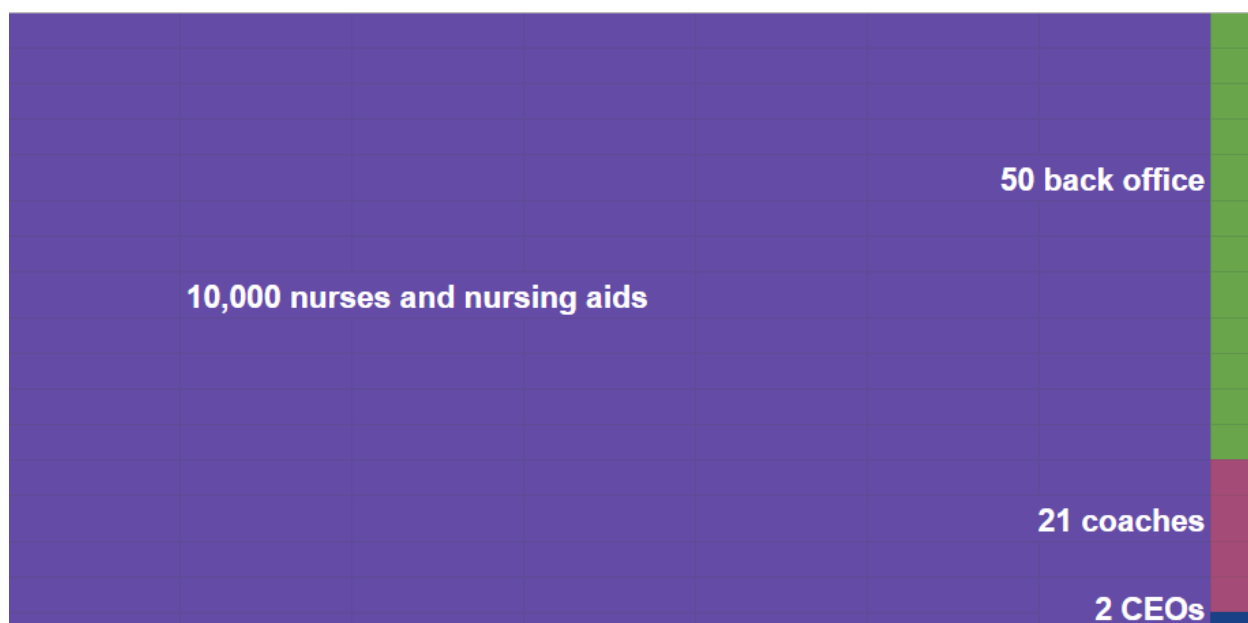
So, this way of thinking isn't all touchy-feely (although it does produce more humane and adaptable places to work). It produces incredible results too.

Now it is time to ask yourself, do you want to continue to try to control uncontrollable things, or do you want to unleash the potential of your team and organisation?

## This Organisational Chart Will Blow Your Mind

One of the most exciting companies in the world is Buurtzorg. Founded by Jos de Blok in 2006, Buurtzorg is a home healthcare organisation based in the Netherlands. Jos was a nurse frustrated by the bureaucracy of modern healthcare and so he founded his own company.

Buurtzorg is now the most successful healthcare company in the country. It has the best staff satisfaction, highest performance ratings and best financial performance. And it has such an interesting organisational structure you have to draw it differently.



Each of the 10,000 nurses is organised into a team of around 8 who look after people in a particular area. And they manage themselves. Completely. Look what is missing from the

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chart. There is no hierarchy, there are no layers and there are no managers. When the teams need support they get it from other teams or they can call on a coach to help them to work through an issue. And Buurtzorg's slogan is:

*"Humanity over bureaucracy"*

Now if you are reading this you are probably a manager or a leader and you might be thinking, is my profession dying? Well, not yet. It is unlikely that we'll see a radical transformation in all organisations in the near future, but we can all still learn from these pioneers.

So, take a moment to ask yourself, what would you rather have, more humanity or more bureaucracy?

## **Assumptions About People In This Context**

If we start to make a shift, to create teams and organisations that are more human-centred and less machine like, it requires different assumptions about people:

- They can bring their whole self to work.
- They all have equal worth but each has different gifts.
- They can self manage, motivated by collective purpose.
- We grow with feedback and respect and learn together.
- We want to be responsible and accountable.
- We recognize that we are all deeply interconnected, part of something bigger.

How does that sound? Is it too much of a stretch? If that's the case, let me ask you to consider something else.

Think about your life outside of work, think about your friends, clubs you belong to, the ways you volunteer and the people you know in your neighbourhood. Isn't this how you see your relationships with them?

So, why should you leave that side of your humanity at the door of the office?

The answer is that we're all like the fish in the story. We just didn't realise we could swim in different waters.



## What Does This Mean for Leaders and Managers?

New ways of working, self-managing teams, non-hierarchical organisations all exist in the world today. They exist alongside whatever context you find yourself in at the moment.

And so, it isn't fanciful to change. It isn't impossible to do things differently. It is perfectly within your gift to make a strong change in this direction.

But I don't want to pretend it is easy. After all, just like all of us, you have been swimming in the water all of your life. If you swim up a new river, into a new lake, you might need to learn how to adapt. And that might take a little time. It might take a little practice. You might be tempted to swim back into familiar waters.

That's completely normal, so I'm going to provide you with a few ideas you can use to change things in a safe way. Before long you'll find yourself saying, "isn't the water lovely" to some other managers and leaders and encouraging them to swim along with you.

### Idea 1 Change Your Frame of Reference

If you are a leader of self-managing individuals. You need to move away from a directive form of management. To help you with that, try to think of your leadership as comprising three roles:

- Architect: to create the structures and working practices that allow people to do their best work.
- Conductor: to encourage a focus on the overall goals of the organisation, to inspire, to tell stories and to help everyone to sing together.
- Coach: to help each person and each team to work through their challenges and to improve.

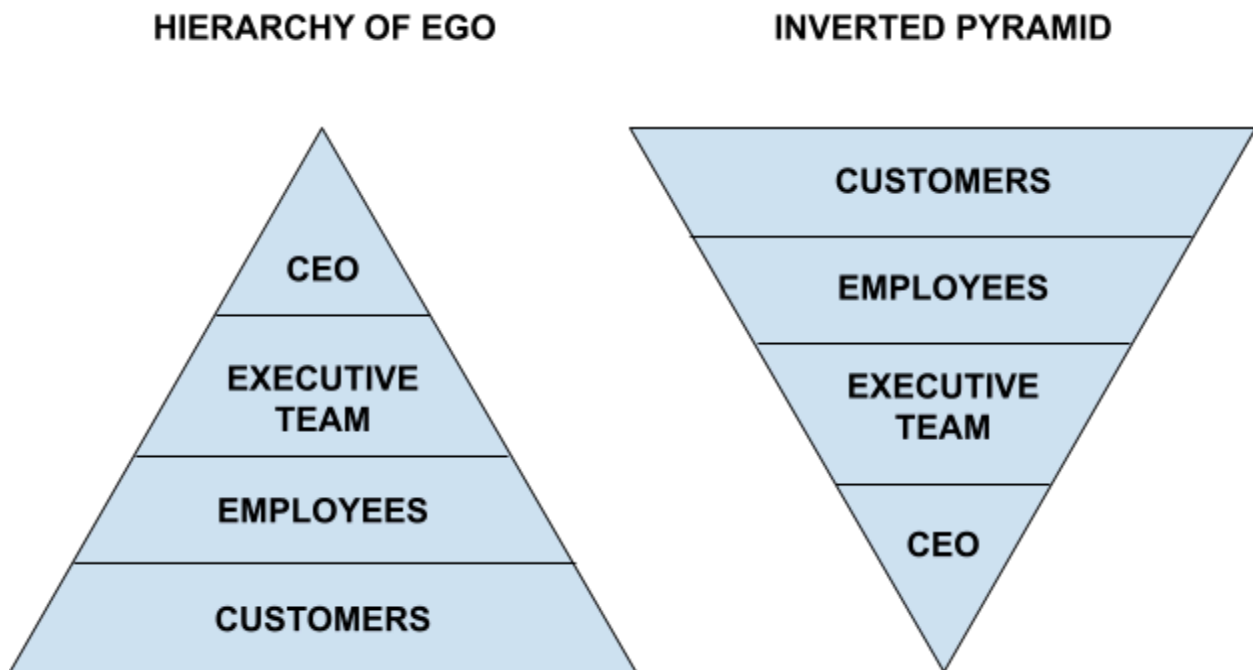
If you try to consciously move between these roles, you'll find that you have a much more rewarding experience of leadership, management and work.

What could you do to be more of a coach, an architect and a conductor?

## Idea 2 Invert the Pyramid

Unless you are the founder or CEO, it is unlikely that you have the authority to radically change the hierarchical structure of your organisation. Even if you do have the authority, it probably isn't a great idea to do that in one stroke anyway!

But one thing you can do is to change your mental model of the organisation by inverting the pyramid.



Wherever you are on your organisation's org chart, when you flip the mental model (so those below you move above you and vice versa) you instantly have different expectations of yourself and of others. For example, your boss is there to support you and you are there to support your team.

How does this idea affect how you might behave at work?

### **Idea 3 Change the Way You Meet**

How do you organise meetings? Do you start with an agenda? Perhaps you don't even need to write an agenda because you have a repeating meeting with a standard agenda and nobody can actually remember who started it?

One of the most powerful and impactful ways to instantly change the dynamic in a team or an organisation is to change the way you meet. There are lots of different ways to do this. Ways that are suited to all kinds of different decision making. Ways that work for surfacing ideas, making decisions and so much more.

By far the simplest way to change any meeting (even if you have a traditional agenda) is to introduce the concept of speaking in rounds. What this means is just that everyone takes turns to speak.

For example you might say, "we need to decide which project we need to take forward next, so let's see what everyone thinks." Then, ask everyone to share their ideas one by one in the order they are sat in the room, or the order they appear on Zoom.

What happens when you do this is that everyone gets to contribute equally, but also everyone gets to *listen* equally. It stops the situation where people are not really paying attention because they are waiting for their turn to speak.

There are more nuances to this you can develop, but how would it change your organisation if you implemented this one technique?

### **Idea 4 Trust The People, Fix The System**

There is a saying that trust is something you earn. I'm not sure that that is always true. Most people can be trusted. They are like you. And you are trustworthy, right?

As a manager and a leader it is very powerful to give trust. And to back it up by saying things like "I trust you to make a good decision". And to back that up (particularly if the decision turns out to be a bad one) to coach the person, not to blame them.

Part of the blight of the modern organisation is the KPI (Key Performance Indicator). These can be useful when we remember that they don't tell us everything. They only tell us something about the things we can measure.

Always try to think that you are measuring the performance of a system, not of a person. If you want to improve performance, work on the system/organisation. The most important part of that system is the people.

If you remember the gardening analogy from earlier, there's no point shouting at the potatoes if they don't grow. Rather you need to step into the potato patch and look around to see what is going on.

What would happen to your leadership if you started each day with universal positive regard for everyone around you?

## **Idea 5 Do Some Inner Work**

If you decide you want to be a new kind of leader or manager that is a wonderful thing. The world (and organisations) need more people like you.

But the first thing you need to change is yourself. You also have a mental model that was developed in old ways of thinking and organising. This will show up particularly in times of stress. If you encourage a team to self-organise and they start to make mistakes, will you be able to resist telling them what to do?

In other words, it isn't enough to change the structures and practices around you, you need to change yourself too. The good news is that this can be an incredibly rewarding journey. But it isn't one that most people can complete alone.

And so you need to reach out for support. Listen to podcasts. Talk to other progressive leaders. Join networking groups. Hire someone to support you in your transformation.

You need to do this, because lots of people (who haven't had your insight) will think you are crazy. The answer to that is to find your islands of sanity. Islands full of fellow travellers.

What kind of support do you need for the next steps in your journey?



## **Idea 6 Agree Things, Effortlessly**

One of the biggest challenges in changing to a less directive approach to leadership is that, well, if nobody is telling you what to do, how do you decide what to do?

One answer to this is to develop something called an advice process. A classic example of this is that anyone in a team who has a problem is allowed to call a special meeting to ask for help. Everyone in the team is invited and encouraged to support their colleague.

When the meeting starts, one person describes the problem they have, giving as much context as possible. Typically this lasts for 5-10 minutes and should end with a question.

Then the rest of the team is invited to ask open questions in return. It is important at this stage that they only ask questions, that they don't give advice. And also that they don't ask questions that are really advice like "have you tried x?"

Good examples of open questions are:

- What have you already tried?
- Have you already sought advice?
- Do you have a strong preference for a solution?
- Who needs to be involved in this?

The point of this phase is to help the person think of things they might not have, or to make them realise that they have thought it through pretty well.

Once that phase is over, the team members are allowed to give advice before, finally, the person bringing the problem describes what they have decided to do.

An advice process typically lasts 25-30 minutes at most and almost always ends in great insight, brilliant decision making and a sense of common purpose.

How would it be if you made more of your decisions this way?

## **Idea 7 Get Yourself (And Your Team) A Coach**

Sometimes soft-skills are the hardest skills to develop. They shouldn't be called soft skills at all. It makes it sound like personal development and team building are easier than learning how to use a spreadsheet. I really don't think they are, do you?

Many organisations who are moving to this more progressive way of working make great use of coaches. Sometimes this is group and team coaching, to help develop the bonds between people. Often it is individual coaching for leaders and managers.

Coaching is really important because it stops a gap appearing between when you start to tone down traditional management and the point at which more empowered teams emerge. Some of the benefits of coaching for leaders and managers include:

- Better perspective and clarity.
- Insight into unproductive habits and the ability to alter these patterns.
- Confidence in skills and abilities so you can make tough decisions.
- Improved image and performance.
- Competency in leading and managing diverse employees.
- Accountability for your actions.
- Tangible results.

All of that is true but it isn't easy to enforce coaching on individuals. But it could be for you if you:

- Recognize the need for change.
- Are willing to change.
- Are able to change.

The fact that you are reading this tells me with 90% certainty that you are a coachable person. That probably means that your team is also coachable. But you are also probably keen to know the change you might experience if you are coached.

Some of the A+B transformations people experience include moving from:

- from problem aware to problem solved

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- unproductive to productive
  - average performance to high performance
  - lack of clarity to total focus
  - unsure of your approach to values driven
  - directive leadership to self-managing teams
  - constant battling to flowing improvement
  - traditional management to transformative leadership

But these are just examples. Genuine, person-centred leadership coaching takes you from the place you find yourself to the place you want to be. Wherever that is.

Now that sounds like a good investment don't you think?

## Summary and Key Questions

We've learned that many of the ideas we have about leadership and management have their roots in the industrial revolution. We've learned that we have inherited this thinking almost without realising it. Then we questioned that thinking and realised that there are different ways of organising and therefore different ways of managing and leading. Finally we've learned some key ideas that will help us to make changes right away.

As you make a start on the next chapter of your career, here are some questions that will help you to think about what you can do next.

- Why do managers think the way that managers think?
- Do you want to think differently from other managers and leaders?
- Do you want to be able to bring your whole self to work?
- How do you want the people you lead and manage to feel about coming to work?
- Can you imagine what it would be like to work in a place where leaders view people as potential waiting to unfold?
- What's stopping you from doing the best work of your life?
- Can you draw your current organisation in a way that recognises interconnectedness, rather than hierarchy?
- Is your organisational context complex or complicated?
- Is your organisation a mechanistic, physical thing, with hard lines and boxes, or is it a network of humans?
- Do you want to continue to try to control things, or do you want to unleash the potential of your team and organisation?
- What would you rather have, more humanity or more bureaucracy?
- Why should you leave that side of your humanity at the door of the office?
- What could you do to be more of a coach, an architect and a conductor?
- How does this affect how you might behave at work if you invert the pyramid?
- How would it change your organisation if you changed the way you meet?
- What would happen to your leadership if you started each day with universal positive regard for everyone around you?
- What kind of support do you need for the next steps in your journey?



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- How would it be if you made more of your decisions using an advice process?
  - How are you going to bring coaching into your leadership journey?

If you even partially answer some of those questions, you'll be well on your way to becoming a progressive 21st Century Leader. And I wish you well on your journey.

But I have one last piece of advice for you. If you are like me, once you are exposed to these ideas, you will want to make everything better. As you do that, you will meet resistance, you'll make mistakes and you will get frustrated. The truth is, you never really arrive with this kind of work. But one day, you will suddenly find that you are enjoying the water more than you ever thought possible. And that day will be magical.

## Call to Action

Thank you for taking the time to download and read this work. It is a very surface level description of some of the ideas that underpin my practice as a coach. Ideas that I am passionate about.

If you would like to talk to me about anything related to coaching, leading teams or improving organisations, please get in touch through email [stephen@stephenlockcoaching.com](mailto:stephen@stephenlockcoaching.com) or through my [website](#) where you can find out about all of the services I provide. These include individual, team and group coaching, management training, facilitation and keynote speaking.

I am also pretty active on [LinkedIn](#) where I am always happy to connect. I would love to hear from you.

If you have found this useful I have two super short requests for you:

1. Encourage your friends to visit my website ([stephenlockcoaching.com](http://stephenlockcoaching.com)) to download a copy themselves.
2. [Leave a testimonial](#). It only takes a minute but it makes a huge difference to me.

Finally, I am wishing you every success and happiness in your growth as a leader and manager. I'm sure you are going to play a part in making the world of work better for everyone.

Have a wonderful day, Stephen

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## About The Author

Working with me, you benefit from twenty years' leadership experience in major organisations, including Hewlett-Packard (France), the National Health Service and the National Institute for Health Research.

I have studied improvement theory with Warwick University Business School, leadership with Ashridge Business School and innovation with INSEAD Business School (Paris). I have an [ILM 7 \(Institute of Leadership and Management\) Certificate in Executive and Senior Leadership Coaching and Mentoring](#).

I was an executive in the National Institute for Health Research during the Covid-19 pandemic. As interim CITO, I was part of the team that, under intense pressure, organised the UK government's urgent research response, successfully recruiting more than one million participants to Covid treatment and vaccine research. Throughout this time I retained my role as a voluntary wellbeing support leader, looking after my colleagues and the health of my organisation.

My approach to coaching is informed by more than just my professional life. I am known internationally for my writing on self-managing teams and progressive organisations. I have a life-long interest in philosophical enquiry and personal growth which has developed into a regular yoga and meditation practice. Born in the UK, I have travelled extensively in Latin America, lived in France and worked in corporate America.

While achieving success at work, I've also gained knowledge variously as a single parent, adoptive parent, step-parent and a parent of a child with special needs. I've been an advocate for improved end of life care, which has led me to speak at the Houses of Parliament, and I have helped to build a library for disadvantaged children on the remote island of Anapia, Lake Titicaca, Peru.

All of which has led me to a deep understanding of balance in life and in work.

## Further Inspiration

If you want to know more about creating, adapting and leading progressive teams and organisations, here are a few of the best places to start.

### Reinventing Organisations

[Reinventing Organizations](#) is an inspirational book about how and why to consider changing to new ways of working by Frederic Laloux. In it you will find lots of case studies from world changing organisations that work in new and innovative ways. One of my favourite quotes from Laloux is:

*“As human beings, we are not problems waiting to be solved, but potential waiting to unfold.”*

Can you imagine what it would be like to work in a place where the leaders believed that of you? And where you knew how to lead people in that spirit?

That would be pretty special wouldn't it?

### The Corporate Rebels

The Corporate Rebels quit their corporate jobs and started travelling the world with a bucket list” of workplace pioneers and innovative companies they wanted to visit. Then they turned their learning into a book and an academy to help others to transform. Their mission is: *“To Make Work More Fun”*

### Brave New Work

[Brave New Work](#) is a book and a podcast by the inspirational Aaron Dignan, founder of The Ready consultancy. Dignan poses this wonderful question:

*“What’s stopping us from doing the best work of our lives?”*

And rather than simply pose that question, the book helps you to work through it methodically with your teams to try and figure out a new operating system for your organisation.



## Leadermorphosis

[Leadermorphosis](#) is a truly wonderful podcast from Lisa Gill. Lisa is an author, consultant and coach who has been working in new ways of working for many years. And she has interviewed just about all of the great thinkers in this space including Aaron Dignan and Frederic Laloux. One of my favourite quotes from Lisa herself is:

*"Self-managing organisations should be leaderful, not leaderless."*

So, if you prefer to get your inspiration from the spoken word, this is the place to go.

## Human Learning Systems

Sometimes the public sector and third sector can get a little ignored in conversations about new ways of working. There is no reason why non-profit organisations can't adopt radically new ways of working, but the way services are designed can be a challenge.

That's where [Human Learning Systems](#) (a complexity friendly approach to public services) can be a helpful guide.