The five lenses of leadership

Five bodies of evidence, each asking one kind of question. Ask them in order before you decide what to do.

Companies pick the right person for a manager role about 18% of the time.[1] When a failure repeats that reliably, the cause is unlikely to be individual weakness alone. *The 5 Lenses of Leadership* looks for the mechanisms behind it. The lenses are not rival explanations. They work at different scales, and they stack.

LENSES 1 AND 2	Forces that act on everyone, the leader included.
LENS 3	The individuals involved.
LENSES 4 AND 5	The system and its rules, which the leader can change most directly.

1 Evolutionary psychology

What ancestral problem are people solving here, and does this setting still match it?

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WHAT IT EXPLAINS

Leading and following evolved as answers to coordination problems: moving the group, keeping the peace inside it, competing with other groups. Followers carry detectors for competence and fairness. Rank is either granted for skill (prestige) or taken through fear (dominance).

USE IT

Ask who fits the problem the team faces now. It may not be you. Look for the mismatch: bands of dozens against organizations of thousands, and watching people directly against reading dashboards. Test every strong intuition against data before it becomes a decision.

Works on: Populations, over generations.

Blind spot: Hard to test. It can explain anything after the fact.

Misuse: An excuse: "men are wired for dominance."

2 Neuroscience

What is this situation doing to people's stress and motivation right now?

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WHAT IT EXPLAINS

Under stress, control shifts from the prefrontal cortex to fast, habitual circuits. In a stable hierarchy, the people at the bottom carry the most stress. Instability and lack of control are the stressors. Dopamine tracks surprise and uncertainty, not reward itself.

USE IT

Look down the chain first. Three levers are partly yours: who sets the order of tasks, who gets a say in the deadline, and how early bad news is shared. Before a big bet, ask whether the case rests on analysis or on appetite.

Works on: Individual brains, seconds to months.

Blind spot: Animal studies and small labs. Some findings have failed to replicate.

Misuse: Decoration: "amygdala hijack," "trust hormone."

3 Personality

Who are the people involved, and which of their stable tendencies does this setting reward or punish?

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WHAT IT EXPLAINS

A trait shows up often enough to predict and loosely enough to adjust. Range matters more than transformation. The Big Five correlate with leadership at .31 (extraversion), .28 (conscientiousness), .24 (emotional stability and openness) and .08 (agreeableness).[2] They predict who gets chosen better than who leads well.

USE IT

Rate yourself, then ask a peer to rate you. The disagreement is the useful part. Change one behavior at a time, in one situation you pick in advance. Cover your gap with a person who has the strength, and say what you will hand over.

Works on: Individuals, over years.

Blind spot: It cannot tell you whether the setting rewards a trait.

Misuse: Typing: four colors or sixteen letter codes.

4 Complexity

What pattern is forming from interactions nobody is directing?

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WHAT IT EXPLAINS

In a complex system you can't dictate outcomes. You can shape the conditions: who talks to whom, what gets rewarded, how information flows and how much slack exists. Most failures come from using the complicated-problem playbook on a complex problem.[3]

USE IT

Diagnose the domain first: clear, complicated, complex or chaotic. If it is complex, run several small probes at once, amplify what works and stop what doesn't. Check four conditions: psychological safety, the informal network, slack for experiments, and sensing at the edge.

Works on: Networks and systems, months to years.

Blind spot: It explains failures better than it guides action.

Misuse: Fatalism. Leaders are accountable for conditions.

5 Game theory

What does the current structure of payoffs actually reward?

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WHAT IT EXPLAINS

Exhortation fails when the payoffs point the other way. In a prisoner's dilemma, a person gains by holding back even if everyone else cooperates, so trust alone does not fix it. In a stag hunt, people would cooperate if they were sure others would. Organizations often reward A while hoping for B.[4]

USE IT

Work out which game you are in, then change the payoffs. Measure what you want. Make people expect to work together again. Make help visible. Play tit for tat: open with cooperation, respond at once, forgive, be predictable.[5] Watch for the free rider.

Works on: Interactions between players.

Blind spot: Real people misread payoffs, care about fairness and act under stress.

Misuse: Cynicism. Fines for late day-care pickup raised lateness.

Three habits

Start with the question the problem makes urgent. A sales force gaming its quota is a game theory problem first.

Check the lens you did not use. It is usually the one that explains the surprise.

Look for places where two lenses disagree. The risk is highest there, and a small test teaches the most.

The main error is carrying a finding across scales. **A trait correlation of .31 does not tell you whether this particular candidate will succeed.**

Worked example: Ford, 2006

Alan Mulally arrives from Boeing. Ford is losing money, and every chart at the weekly review is green.

1 Evolutionary	Admitting a problem cost status. Rank was held by looking strong.
2 Neuroscience	Executives expected punishment for a problem, so each reported green.
3 Personality	Mulally said people would adopt the new culture or leave.
4 Complexity	Charts stayed green while the company lost $12.7 billion. Nobody ordered that.
5 Game theory	The first person to report red paid the cost. Mark Fields marked the Edge liftgate red, and Mulally clapped. The next week the charts were "a rainbow."

Bad news did not travel up. The fix started at the base of the 4P Framework, with People.

The lenses support reflection and development. P×E is not a validated hiring, promotion, or performance-prediction tool.

From *The 5 Lenses of Leadership: How Biology, Behavior, and Complexity Shape the Way We Lead* by G. Damon Wells, 2026. amazon.com/dp/B0HL77YNY3

1. Gallup, *State of the American Manager*, 2015: companies fail to choose the candidate with the right talent 82% of the time.
2. Judge, Bono, Ilies and Gerhardt, "Personality and leadership," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2002.
3. Snowden and Boone, "A leader's framework for decision making," *Harvard Business Review*, 2007 (Cynefin).
4. Kerr, "On the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B," *Academy of Management Journal*, 1975.
5. Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984.

Which lens explains the problem on your team? Talk it through on a 30-minute call. Book a call calendly.com/summaryleadership/30min