FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

A short guide for entrepreneurs

INTRODUCTION

1. Why feminist leadership

Some figures on gender inequality around the world

1 in 3 women	is subjected to physical or sexual violence in the course of her life
12 millions de filles	are married before the age of 18 each year
27% of women	aged 15 to 49 say they have experienced domestic violence (UN Women, 2021)
Less than 20%	of agricultural land in Africa is owned by women. Women account for 50% of the agricultural workforce.
60%	of the world's poor are women

Feminism:

"A set of philosophical movements and ideas that share a common goal: to define, promote and achieve political, economic, cultural, social and legal equality between women and men." According to Afro-feminist author bell hooks, feminism is "a movement that aims to end sexism, exploitation and gender oppression."

GENDER STEREOTYPES

These are generalised and preconceived beliefs about the characteristics and roles attributed to women and men. These beliefs can have negative consequences, as they limit the power of men and women to act. In our societies, women are particularly affected by gender stereotypes.

Can you guess the gender of the two groups of adjectives below?

Fighter, strong, gifted in science, enterprising, assertive, good negociator, impulsive, courageous, robust, ambitious, independent, persevering, competitive...

Calm, gentle, good with words, emotional, reasoned, attentive, toughtful, sensitive, affectionate, shy, manipulative, graceful, spendthrift, multitask, delicate...

Leadership today

Leadership refers to a person's ability to guide, motivate and direct a group. Traditionally, leadership is based on a hierarchical structure centred around a leader, who is in a position of authority and takes strategic decisions alone or almost alone. In these models, impersonal, results-based leadership is encouraged.

But this traditional form of leadership comes up against major limitations!

It does not encourage staff to flourish and develop, and so has a negative impact on the opportunities for success of an organization or a project. It also reproduces power structures that are unfavourable to those on the margins (young people, women, ethnic or religious minorities, etc.). That's why it's time to invent more inclusive forms of leadership, and that's what **feminist leadership** is all about!

FEMININE LEADERSHIP OR FEMINIST LEADERSHIP ?

The concept of feminine leadership is an interesting one, but it continues to promote a gendered vision of leadership:
- The term 'feminine leadership' implies that 'classic' leadership is based on know-how linked to characteristics considered to be masculine;
- Feminine leadership reinforces gender stereotypes because it often promotes feminine qualities: gentleness, listening, collaboration, etc.

Thinking about feminist leadership makes it possible to :
- Promote a form of leadership that is truly comitted to gender equality, that is neither feminine nor masculine;
- Propose alternatives to conventional leadership based on authority and domination
- Transform the way we exercise leadership to transform our societies and our relationships between human beings!

Feminist leadership:

'Feminist leadership, in its most basic form, is a commitment to creating alternatives to traditional, hierarchical leadership and organizational cultures. This can take many different forms, from critical self-reflection at an individual level, to the development of new decision-making structures at a collective level. Most importantly, feminist leadership has no fixed definition or step-by-step guide. It is a continuous process of learning and unlearning, both individually and with others.' COFEM, quoted by FRIDA

KEY POINTS

Feminist leadership is an alternative to conventional leadership. It is a form of leadership committed to social justice that aims to create more egalitarian and inclusive societies by transforming power relationships.

There is no fixed definition of feminist leadership, nor any instructions on how to use it: it is an individual and collective process!

2. Key concepts of feminist leadership

There are a number of key concepts that will help you better understand feminist leadership. Understanding them is essential for any leader wishing to adopt these codes and behaviors:

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality is a sociological concept developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. Intersectionality refers to the way in which people experience several forms of domination and discrimination, which intersect and reinforce each other.
For example, a disabled woman from an ethnic minority suffers discrimination linked to her gender, her disability and her ethnicity. However, these factors intersect in unique ways, creating forms of oppression specific to her situation.

POWER

"Power can be defined simply as: (a) who gets what (the distribution of resources); (b) who does what (the allocation of paid and unpaid work); (c) who decides what (decision-making power); and (d) who sets the agenda (who determines what's important, what counts and what can be discussed)." (S. BATLIWALA, 2022)
Feminism defends the idea that power is strengthened by being shared, and invites us to move from **"power over"** to **"power with".**

INCLUSION

Inclusion refers to the inclusion and integration of all people, regardless of their differences and particularities. An inclusive society or organization gives everyone a place. It aims to ensure that everyone feels accepted, respected and valued.

EXCLUSION   SEPARATION   INTEGRATION   INCLUSION
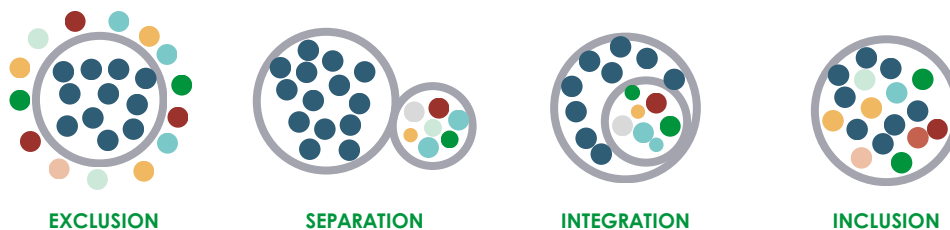
SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice is the principle that "all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, [have] the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity" (Declaration of Philadelphia, 1944).

EMPOWERMENT

The Larousse defines empouvoirement as "the act of giving more power to individuals or groups to enable them to act on their social, economic, political or ecological environment."
Empowerment in feminist currents is a process "that combines an individual dynamic of self-esteem and skills development with collective engagement and progressive social action."

CHANGE STARTS WITH YOURSELF

3. Food for thoughts

Authenticity is at the heart of feminist leadership - feminist leaders are invited to **lead by being themselves.** As feminist leadership is first and foremost a personal journey, there is no set path to it. Nevertheless, there are a number of self-reflexive concepts that are key to developing feminist leadership.

Self-knowledge

Feminist leadership is based on **authenticity**, and emphasizes **individuality** and individual qualities. As a feminist leader, it is important to:

- Know your values
- Know and value your strengths and qualities
- Know and recognize your weaknesses and vulnerabilities.
- Identify your cognitive biases

Cognitive Bias:
A bias is a distortion, often unconscious, in the processing of information, likely to distort reasoning and judgment.
Biases affect the way we see the world, favoring certain information or perspectives over others.

Working on yourself

We all have cognitive biases that influence our relationships with others and unconsciously lead us to reproduce sexist, oppressive or discriminatory behaviour. Identifying these biases and deconstructing them is the foundation of feminist leadership.

In addition to cognitive biases, our personal experiences and family heritages influence the way we exercise leadership. Understanding these elements and overcoming them helps us to progress as leaders. Self-reflection gives us a better understanding of our own reactions, biases and motivations. In this way, leaders can **identify** and **deconstruct instinctive behaviours** based on personal experience that limit their ability to lead effectively and positively. This work develops empathy with their teams and the ability to guide them through a similar transformation process.

PRIVILEGES

Privileges are special rights or advantages granted to certain individuals or groups, often because they belong to a particular social, economic, cultural or identity category. These advantages may be visible or invisible. They stem from social and historical structures that favour certain groups to the detriment of others.

Repositioning yourself in relation to your privileges

Examining and recognising one's privileges helps to deconstruct unconscious biases and discriminatory attitudes.
Being aware of your advantages helps you to better understand the situations of others, to question your automatic judgements and to better contribute to social justice.

Humility

It's important to regularly question your privileges, your behaviour and your ways of communicating. Questioning yourself regularly throughout your career is part of the feminist approach. The feminist leader is capable of recognising her faults and shortcomings so that she can overcome them and move forward.

Self-Care

Knowing how to take care of yourself is an important quality of a feminist leader, and all the more so when the leader is a woman. It is :

- An essential part of developing a healthy relationship with work, commitment and leadership.
- A necessity to resist the overload that often weighs on women who are company directors, leaders in their communities, but also often mothers, sisters, wives, family carers, etc.
- A committed act in societies that ask women to forget themselves and neglect their own needs in order to meet gender-related expectations.

This makes it possible to assert positive leadership in a sustainable way, without it being affected by exhaustion, while having the personal resources needed to cultivate solidarity and collective care in communities and workplaces.

Self-confidence

Self-confidence is an important prerequisite for leadership. However, our patriarchal societies make it more difficult for women to have self-confidence, mainly because of gender stereotypes and the obstacles they create. Women are more affected by limiting beliefs and are more often victims of imposter syndrome.

A few keys to boost your self-confidence

Knowing and recognising your qualities, strengths and successes	Know how to deal with setbacks and see them as learning opportunities
Set achievable and realistic goals and celebrate when you reach them	Develop positive self-affirmations and treat yourself as you would a friend
Getting out of your comfort zone to prove your abilities	Learning to manage stress
Surround yourself with supportive and encouraging people	

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME:

A psychological phenomenon in which a person doubts their skills, achievements and legitimacy, despite objective evidence of success. They feel that they do not deserve their successes and are deceiving those around them, thinking that they could be 'discovered' as incompetent at any moment.

Self-confidence and entrepreneurship:

Women feel less legitimate to create ther businesses than men.
In Africa, they apply less for loans than men.
Studies reveal than in some African countries, 50% of women entrepreneurs believe that they need to enhance their skills compared to only 38% of men

4. Sisterhood

Inspired by the concept of 'fraternity', sorority today refers more to **links of support and solidarity between women who share a common experience linked to their status as women.**
Feminist author Chloé Delaume offers the following definition: "a horizontal relationship, with no hierarchy or birthright. A relationship between woman and woman, neither daughter nor mother (...)".

Let's talk about it : rivalry between women

Rivalry between women is a reality in both the personal and professional spheres, but where exactly does it come from?

Limited opportunities: Patriarchal societies offer little room for women, which creates competition between them for the few opportunities available.

Male gaze: Throughout the history of patriarchal societies, women have traditionally been considered to be under the protection of men, often their husbands. Their survival, and that of their children, thus depended on their ability to enter into a favourable marriage. This history would explain the rivalry between women as competition for men's attention, a resource seen as essential to their security and social status. Rooted in centuries of dependence, this competition perpetuates relations of domination and division between women themselves.

Internalized sexism: Centuries of sexist discourse have led women to view themselves and their peers in a sexist light, prompting them to criticise and devalue each other.

Making rivalry commonplace: Rivalry between women is an integral part of our popular culture: in the cinema, in literature, in telenovelas, in reality TV shows. Beauty contests that promote competition between women are an excellent example of the trivialisation of this rivalry.

This rivalry prevents women from challenging sexist norms and patriarchal structures, and collectively slows them down in their access to opportunities

Sisterhood encourages women to **unite and support each other to face common challenges together**, such as sexism, violence against women and discrimination in the workplace.
Chloé Delaume suggests that "sisterhood should be seen as a **tool for female power, for rethinking what it means to be a woman today, for questioning relationships of domination and for imagining the world of tomorrow".**

Sisterhood is a pillar of feminist leadership:

- To create a united front in the face of gender-related obstacles in the entrepreneurial sector, improve my self-confidence and feel less alone in the face of obstacles
- To develop my leadership skills alongside other inspiring leaders
- To better combat gender inequality by empowering other women in my professional environment and community
- To learn how to put self-help and collective support at the heart of your leadership

"As women, we must stand up for ourselves. As women, we must stand up for each other. As women, we must stand up for justice for all."
Michelle Obama

EMBARKING YOUR TEAM

5. Transformational leadership

The notion of power in feminist leadership

Feminist leadership seeks to **reinvent traditional norms of power,** which are often associated with hierarchical and competitive relationships.

In feminist thinking, **power must be shared** in order to become a tool for **creating lasting and equitable change** in social and political structures.

Feminist leaders do not seek to accumulate power at all costs. On the contrary, they redistribute it and make it possible to collectively transform organizations into structures in which discriminatory and oppressive behaviour and norms do not apply.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is a component of feminist leadership. It promotes leadership that enables individuals to grow and flourish by valuing and stimulating them. It is defined as opposed to transactional leadership.

- Transactional leadership is based on the management of tasks and the achievement of objectives, the transmission of directives and rewards in exchange for the accomplishment of directives.

- Transformational leadership is based on a shared vision and relies on the motivation of teams and their commitment to the organization's mission.

Transformational leadership enables teams to reach their full potential through healthy and positive organizational cultures.

It also enables **organizations to be stronger and perform better** thanks to teams that are committed to the organization's mission.

Keys to transformational leadership

- Clearly communicating the organization's vision
- Make employees the driving force behind the organization's vision
- Involve them in the implementation and development of the organization's mission
- Motivate your teams by inspiring them
- Establish a climate of trust and collaboration
- Encourage autonomy and initiative-taking
- Considering each person as an individual and taking into account their strengths and individual needs
- Encouraging employees to progress professionally and personally
- Valuing the work of employees
- Supporting employees in their professional and personal aspirations

6. Know how to communicate

Communication

Communication is central to feminist leadership. Communication is much more than a means of exchanging information. It is a powerful tool for transforming our organizations and interpersonal relationships, in both the private and professional spheres.

Communication can help to break down oppressive dynamics and create safe spaces in which everyone can make their voices heard, contribute to change and flourish.

The basics of communication in femnist leadership:

- **Creating spaces for dialogue and listening -** Encouraging open and honest discussion so that everyone can make their voice heard and contribute their experiences.
  - Create dedicated times for these exchanges
  - Ensure that the same people do not monopolise the floor and that all the voices that wish to be heard are heard.
  - Ask questions: open questions, questions about opinions and feelings, questions about situations, etc.

- **Active listening and empathy -** Listening to others without judgement, genuinely trying to understand them
  - Giving your full attention: putting your phones away and putting aside ongoing tasks
  - Avoid interrupting others
  - Adopt an open and appropriate body language: create eye contact and show that you're on board
  - Ask open-ended questions to encourage reflection
  - Paraphrasing and rephrasing to show that you are listening and allow the other person to add elements
  - Expressing understanding and empathy, showing that you recognise the other person's emotions without judgement
  - Give advice only when asked for it: people often need to be listened to more than they need advice!

- **Constructive and benevolant feedback -** Improving collaboration, appreciating successes, enabling others to progress and learn from their mistakes without judgement.
  - Provide neutral feedback and ask yourself what role you played in the given situation
  - Make observations, not accusations. Try to start sentences with 'I' and not 'You'.
  - Identify concrete solutions to move for
  - Keep in mind that it is a conversation

🔍 NON-VIOLENT COMMUNICATION (NVC)

Nonviolent communication is a communication method invented in the 1970s by Marshall Ronsenberg and based on authenticity, respect and empathy.

To use NVC, you need to go through four stages:

1. *Observation* : describe the situation objectively, sticking to the facts, without judging or evaluating the other person as a person, using the 'I' form of expression.

2. *Feelings* : express the emotions felt in this specific context. Ask yourself 'What am I feeling right now?

3. *Needs*: recognise the unmet need behind the emotion you are feeling.

4. *Request*: formulate a clear, benevolent request to the person you are talking to, while giving them the opportunity to give their opinion in order to build a win-win outcome.

Recognition and enhancement

Recognising and valuing the talents of our teams is essential to creating healthy, inclusive and fulfilling working environments.

Feminist leadership encourages us to recognise the contributions of each team member in order to boost their self-confidence, contribute to their empowerment and encourage them to participate fully in the organization's mission. Recognition and appreciation cultivate a sense of belonging and strengthen team bonds thanks to a climate that values individuals as much as the team as a whole. Valuing diversity of experience also helps to bring different perspectives into the organization's projects.

By recognising everyone's contribution, the leader breaks with traditional leadership models by giving importance to all voices, including those of marginalised people or minorities (young people, women, people with disabilities, people in vulnerable socio-economic situations, etc.) who tend not to be listened to.

Transparency

Transparency about decisions taken, about resources and their allocation, about the challenges faced and about the distribution of responsibilities is one of the levers for the distribution of power, which is an important aspect of feminist leadership.

Transparent communication and internal policies help to increase the participation and involvement of teams, create a climate of trust, share responsibility and combat bias and discriminatory behaviour.

Practising transparency is a way of sharing power with teams and stakeholders.

🔍 ACCOUNTABILITY

*Acountability refers to the fact of being accountable to stakeholders for one's actions, decisions and actions. This means being able to justify your choices and accept the consequences of your mistakes.*

Liable leaders

If teams are accountable to their colleagues and hierarchy for their actions, in feminist leadership, leaders are also accountable to their teams for their actions and decisions. Linked to transparency, this is a way of sharing power.

7. Why transform our organizations
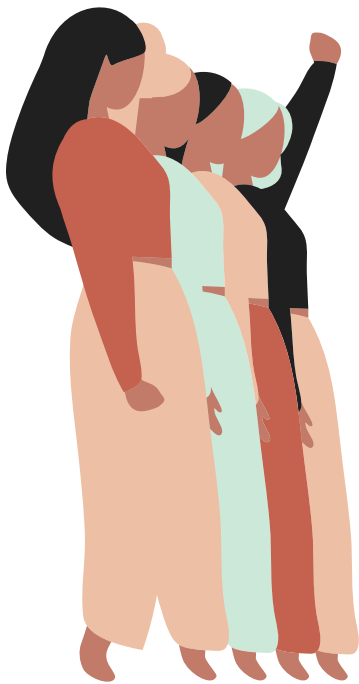
Caring goes beyond the individual to the community. In our organizations, these values of solidarity and caring create inclusive and respectful working environments, where everyone feels supported. By changing our approach, we are transforming not only the well-being of our employees, but also the social impact of our organizations, thereby contributing to a fairer, more caring society.

Diversity, inclusion and well-being in the workplace are first and foremost issues of social justice, but they are also crucial to the success of a collective entrepreneurial project focused on growth and sustainable impact on society.

The diversity of identities and backgrounds within an organization has many beneficial effects:

Creating groups with multiple and diverse experiences and perspectives means creating a creative and innovative force capable of analysing societal issues in depth and devising innovative, impactful and sustainable solutions and products.

This diversity, combined with the creation of a healthy and caring work environment, stimulates group dynamics and interaction. The richness of these inclusive organizations opens up new fields of learning and development for your employees, boosting their commitment and their attachment to this shared project.

Beetle Syndrome

The Beetle Syndrome is a cognitive bias that leads us to value and surround ourselves with people who are similar to us. It's a reassuring confirmation bias that keeps us in a comfortable position. However, this bias limits the development of the organization and its employees by locking them into a restricted and restrictive framework.

Combating sexist and discriminatory discriminatory bias

Transforming your organization therefore also means confronting its own sexist and/or discriminatory bias. A feminist leader is someone who knows how to recognise their own biased representations and who works to deconstruct them. This constant battle against their often discriminatory biases is a prerequisite for transforming management and collaboration practices

8. Building an inclusive and healthy community

The Diversity-Equity-Inclusion balance

Transforming your organization by creating an emancipating and caring collective requires you to adopt new practices. These new practices must be based on the constant search for a balance between Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.
- **Diversity** means ensuring that different groups are represented within my organization
- **Equity** seeks to put in place fair practices and treatment that meet the individual needs of each employee.
- **Inclusion** means ensuring that all members are valued, integrated and involved in the development of the organization.

Developing inclusive practices

Decision-making and power-sharing

Feminist leadership focuses on how we use our respective power to lead collaboratively (power with) rather than directive management (power over). Power sharing and collective decision making are key to transforming the organization along feminist lines.

Creating spaces of shared power, based on trust, transparency and valuing skills, encourages inclusive decision-making and team commitment. This model also reduces oppressive power dynamics, strengthening the organization's agility and resilience.

The care environment and the fight against bullying

Creating a caring and harassment-free environment requires an active commitment to protecting the well-being of every member. Clear zero-tolerance policies on harassment are essential, along with secure reporting procedures and regular training on respect and inclusion. Establishing listening areas and anonymous feedback tools fosters trust and allows everyone to feel protected and valued. This healthy environment encourages personal and collective development.

Fair and transparent pay and non-wage policies

By guaranteeing fair pay, the organization recognises and values the work of each employee, reinforcing their sense of justice and inclusion. In addition, fair pay is a lever for economic and social empowerment, as it provides employees with the resources they need to build a stable and fulfilling future for themselves. This policy contributes to the commitment and satisfaction of our teams, as well as being an essential pillar for equality and social justice within the company. Transparency reinforces the feeling of fairness and legitimacy, contributing to a healthy and motivating working atmosphere.Internal actions and policies promoting inclusion

Internal actions and policies promoting inclusion

Inclusion requires the implementation of practical, targeted actions. These practices need to be tailored to the context of each organization (team composition, financial resources, size, location, etc.).

These practices may include extending parental leave; offering flexible working hours; company daycare and crèches; training and specific support for employees from disadvantaged backgrounds; time and space for employees wishing to practice their religion; comprehensive health insurance; support for young people at the start of their careers, etc.

Let's take a closer look at different practices that feminist leaders can put in place within their organizations

Below you will find a number of practices that can be used to promote the building of an inclusive, equitable team that encourages diversity. These are inspirational examples, which obviously need to be adapted to the specific characteristics and particular contexts of each organization.

Self-governance

Self-governance is based on participative management and collaborative decision-making, where power is equitably distributed among the members of the organization. Instead of a rigid hierarchy, groups called 'circles' make specific decisions related to their area of expertise without the need for a single approval from a leader. These decisions are validated by collective consent, i.e. everyone must 'agree' without any major objections. This approach reduces bottlenecks and encourages commitment, transparency and innovation, as everyone is accountable and free to express their concerns.

Implementation of a transparent and fair pay policy

An equal pay policy aims to ensure that all employees receive fair pay for work of equivalent value within an organization. There are a number of ways of achieving this:
- Establishing a clear and objective pay scale, based on measurable criteria such as seniority, level of autonomy and responsibilities.
- Transparency on the different levels of remuneration within the team.
- A salary scale to avoid excessive pay differentials.
- Self-determination of salaries, based on an objective scale and within a well-defined framework, is another way of ensuring that employees feel they are being paid what they are worth.

Creation of listening units

Listening units are systems set up within organizations to provide employees with a safe space in which to express their concerns about their professional practices and working conditions. They are run by people trained in active listening, preferably from outside the organization.
The aim is to gather confidential information on the difficulties encountered by employees, whether these relate to stress, internal conflicts, harassment or ill-being. They play a key role in the prevention of psychosocial risks, by encouraging employees to speak out without fear of reprisals and by facilitating the rapid handling of sensitive situations.

Non-discrimination practices in recruitment

Discrimination in recruitment is the first obstacle to inclusive and diverse organizations. It is often the result of unconscious biases that need to be deconstructed, but which can also be mitigated by adopting certain practices :
- Writing inclusive and neutral job descriptions
- Using diverse recruitment panels
- Anonymising applications
- Implementing an objective skills assessment grids

EXERCICE IN INTROSPECTION

Where am I in my leadership?

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND SELF-AWARENESS

TAKE STOCK OF YOURSELVES	...TO UNDERSTAND YOUR LEADERSHIP
What are my personal values?	Can I share my values with my teams?
What are my strengths and weaknesses ?	How do my qualities and weaknesses influence the way I lead the group?
Do I give myself regular rest? Do I know how to rest without feeling guilty? Have I decided what I like to do to rest and recharge my batteries? Do I often feel overworked?	Does my fatigue ever have a negative impact on the way I lead my teams? Do I encourage my teams to rest and recharge their batteries?
My self-confidence on a scale of 1 to 10, how self-confident I am? How have I improved my self-confidence over time? How can I make it even better ?	How does my self-confidence influence my work and my professional and personal environment? Do I encourage my colleagues to improve their self-confidence? How can I do this?
What are my privileges? What is my conception of the world? How does the world perceives me?	What pressures do my privileges put on me? What pressures can I (or have I) exerted on others because of my position?
What are my personal assets? my story, my life, my difficult experiences? What are my unconscious biases?	How do they influence the way I communicate? How do they influence my decisions? How do they influence the way I run my organization and manage my team?

EXERCICE IN INTROSPECTION

Where am I in my leadership?

TRANSFORMING ITS ORGANIZATION

TAKE STOCK OF YOURSELVES	...TO UNDERSTAND YOUR LEADERSHIP
Is my leadership in my organization helping to create a fairer and more egalitarian world?	Is there diversity in my teams? What policies do I put in place to promote inclusion? What policies do I put in place to develop team members' self-fulfilment and empowerment?
Am I ready to share power ?	What actions have I taken to share power? Do teams have the opportunity to take part in decision-making? If so, are they encouraged to do so?
Does the communication with and within the team help employees feel good and progress ?	What good communication practices have I adopted personally? What good communication practices have we established within the team?
Am I able to demonstrate transparency in my leadership?	By what actions (at personal and organizational level) do I create a culture of transparency in the organization?

RESULTS!

At the end of this exercise,

1. Note your leadership strengths
2. Note the areas in which you would like to improve

To go further: Write down five things you commit to doing in the next 6 months to improve your leadership skills.

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