Leading From the Heart
Wise Compassion for Founders, Executives and Practitioners

Why Lead from the Heart?

For generations, leaders were taught that caring was a liability. Keep your distance and let the numbers speak. Yet people have never given their best to a spreadsheet. They give it to someone who sees them, believes in them, backs them up and tells them the truth.

Leading from the heart means letting genuine care for people shape how you lead, while you keep your standards high. It asks for courage more than softness. It is harder to have a direct conversation with someone you care about than with someone you have written off, and it is far more likely to change something.

For a founder, the heart is also where the original fire lives: the reason you started and the people you hoped to serve. Leaders who lose touch with it often find themselves running a company they no longer love. Leaders who keep it close tend to build teams that stay.

Four Voices on Heart-Led Leadership

- **Mark C. Crowley, Lead From the Heart (revised 2022).** Feelings drive commitment far more than logic does, and people leave managers who make them feel unvalued or uncared for. Heart-led leaders invest in each person's growth and well-being, and engagement follows.
- **Mike Krzyzewski, Leading with the Heart (2000).** Coach K pictures a strong team as a fist: five fingers that become powerful only when they close together. He names the five as communication, trust, collective responsibility, care and pride.
- **Kevin Cashman, Leadership from the Inside Out.** You cannot separate the leader from the person, so growing as a leader means growing as a person. Purpose lives where your gifts and your values meet.
- **Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter, Compassionate Leadership (2022).** Drawing on data from 15,000 leaders, they describe wise compassion as the ability to do hard things in a human way. Their reminder: being clear is kind.

Care and Candor Together

Heart-led leadership can tip into pleasing. Feeling every person's pain as your own wears you down and clouds your judgment, and protecting people from hard truths leaves them unprepared. Compassion steps back far enough to ask what would truly help, then acts on it. Sometimes that means a raise or a day off. Sometimes it means telling a founder friend the product is failing, or letting a beloved employee go with honesty and dignity.

Parts That Guard the Heart

Through the lens of Internal Family Systems, the heart at work is often guarded by protective parts with good intentions. One part plays the tough boss so no one can take advantage. Another keeps everyone happy so no one will leave. Another insists that caring will cost results, and another works around the clock so no one sees it struggle. Each learned its job somewhere, often long before you led anyone.

Beneath them lives the Self, the place of calm, curiosity, compassion and courage that remains whole in each of us. Leading from the heart is, at its core, leading from Self. When your protectors trust that you can hold both care and standards, they can step back, and the people around you feel the difference.

Practices for the Workweek

- **Meet people as people.** Hold a short weekly one-on-one with each direct report that is about them, their growth and what matters in their life, more than status updates.
- **Set your intention at the door.** Before each meeting, ask yourself how you can best benefit the people in it.
- **Have one direct, kind conversation a day.** Say the true thing with warmth, and stay for the response.
- **Recognize widely.** Thank everyone who met the goal, along with the stars, and name what each person contributed.
- **Ask what is needed.** “What do you need from me to do your best work?” is one of the most heart-led questions a leader can ask.

Questions for Reflection

- Who on my team would say I truly see them, and who might not?
- Which protective part tends to lead when I feel under pressure?
- What hard thing am I avoiding because I care, and what would wise compassion do?
- Why did I begin this work, and how close am I to that reason today?

Calling on Support

Leaders need care too, and the body knows it. In a Carnegie Mellon study of 404 adults, people who felt well supported were less likely to catch a cold after being exposed to the virus, even during stretches of conflict. Hugs accounted for about a third of that protection, and those who were hugged more had milder symptoms when they did get sick. Let yourself be held by your people, and by more than people.

The living world has been modeling heart-led leadership far longer than any business school. An elephant herd follows its matriarch, whose long memory of water and danger keeps the whole family alive. Muskoxen facing a threat form a ring with the young at the center. A hummingbird carries a heart that can beat more than a thousand times a minute in a body you could hold in your palm. A field of young sunflowers turns together to follow the sun. Call on an ancestor who fed whoever came to the door, and ask them to sit with you before a hard conversation. Picture the future you at a farewell gathering, hearing what people remember about how you led. And rest your own heart in the heart of the Great Mystery, which has room for every person you are responsible for.

When We Work Together

Leading from the heart is simple to describe and hard to live under pressure. In my work with founders, executives and practitioners, we get to know the parts that guard your heart, so care and clear standards can live in the same leader.

A Final Word

The people you lead may forget your strategy. They will remember how it felt to work with you.

Easily Accessible Resources

- *Lighthouse, “Why You Should Lead From the Heart (And How to Start) with Mark Crowley”: getlighthouse.com/blog/why-you-should-lead-from-the-heart*
- *Duke Department of Medicine, “Lessons in Leadership from Coach K”: medicine.duke.edu/news/lessons-leadership-coach-k-resilience-and-power-teams*
- *Potential Project, “Compassionate Leadership Is Necessary, But Not Sufficient”: potentialproject.com/insights/compassionate-leadership-is-necessary-but-not-sufficient*
- *Association for Psychological Science, “Hugs Help Protect Against Colds by Boosting Social Support”: psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/hugs-may-help-protect-against-colds-stress-related-infection.html*
- *Related handouts: The Art of Accomplishment and Bringing the Sacred Into Work.*

Influences and Credits

- *Mark C. Crowley, Lead From the Heart: Transformational Leadership for the 21st Century (Hay House, revised 2022). Mike Krzyzewski with Donald T. Phillips, Leading with the Heart (2000). Kevin Cashman, Leadership from the Inside Out. Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter, Compassionate Leadership: How to Do Hard Things in a Human Way (Harvard Business Review Press, 2022). The descriptions here are written fresh; for the full teachings, go to the books.*
- *Research on support: Sheldon Cohen and colleagues (2015) on hugs, social support and infection.*
- *Self and protective parts come from Internal Family Systems, developed by Dr. Richard Schwartz. Calling on the support of the living world and the unseen comes from Neoshamanic IFS (NIFS), the approach I practice and teach.*