

1

Leadership Mental Health: The History of Being Screwed

“Leadership became a slow erasure of self. The further I rose, the less support I had, and the more I believed I had to carry it all alone. The pressure to hold things together without adequate mentorship or training eventually broke me down mentally, emotionally, and physically.”

Interviewee: male, Gen X, Caucasian, Senior Leadership, construction industry

“Becoming a leader has basically destroyed my mental health. I carry the burden of my higher position, as well as that of supporting my team and their concerns, on my shoulders, all the time. I often wake up with concerns about work or how I’m going to get everything done and not sacrifice my personal life, my spouse, my children, and my health.”

Interviewee: female, Millennial, Caucasian, Senior Director, health technology industry

THIS CHAPTER IS *not* meant to sound like I’m whining on behalf of leaders. When we give people visibility, impact, and influence over others, we must expect that role to bring greater accountability,

responsibility, and self-awareness. However, we also need to recognize the weight that comes with a leadership position. A weight that is often overlooked, and even reinforced, through messaging, social norms, and systems that have made this clear: leadership mental health is not part of the “leadership conversation,” whether that emotional distress stems from work or not.

The Broken Building Blocks of the Sociological Assignment of Power

Going back to Phil Knight for a moment, I loved the 2023 film *Air*. Great writing and acting aside, what I loved most about this film were the numerous messages about leadership, team collaboration, and trust. Set in the 1980s, a senior leader at Nike, Sonny Vaccaro, had a monologue when speaking to then-young and pre-famous basketball player Michael Jordan, who arguably went on to become one of the best basketball players in U.S. history. Sonny’s message to Michael was clear in a powerful monologue in the film: that Michael’s leadership in his sport, while it would be enjoyable, would also be hard, heartbreaking, and at times, feel like an impossible position.

“ . . . People are going to build you up . . . we’ll build you up into something that doesn’t even exist . . . But you know what? Once they’ve built you as high as they possibly can, they’re gonna tear you back down—it’s the most predictable pattern. We build you into something that doesn’t exist, and that means you have to try to be that thing all day, every day. That’s how it works. And we do it again, and again, and again.”¹

What does Sonny’s monologue show us? We need to look at and deconstruct the pattern. Addressing the ongoing, and predictable, neglect of leadership mental health means examining the figuratively cracked foundation beneath it. Examining the history reveals the building blocks upon which our current expectations and biases are based, namely “archetypes” of how we expect leaders to act, behave, and guide us. Ultimately, fueling the meaning behind the sociological assignment of power, and how we believe it should

govern expectations of leadership behavior, in the hope that we've put the right people in charge, unencumbered by doubt. Unfortunately, what naturally results opposes the emotional needs of *humans* in those roles. A toxic paradox: here's what we've decided you need to be, what we expect of you, and you will not receive support in return because you shouldn't "need it." Over the years, I've observed this in my work too, seeing two main reasons why people generally don't pay attention to leadership mental health:

1. We don't think we *need* to:
 - i.e., Leaders are "fine"
 - P.S. I once learned that "fine" stands for:
(F)eelings (I)nside (N)ot (E)xpressed
I know, I wasn't the same after I learned that either.
2. We don't *want* to:
 - i.e., Leaders hold power over us, so we shouldn't "have to."

How did we arrive here? Let's take a high-level trip down memory lane to see why. I'm not an anthropologist, but I want to acknowledge how our starting point often influences our current position. With a quick nod to our power dynamics as a species, I've included and focused on a few sociological and psychological theories that illustrate this point and explain how they fit into the larger idea we're trying to deconstruct, break, and replace. Thanks for indulging my sociology and psychology degrees for a moment, too.

A Brief Ode to the Unintended Toxicity of the Original Leadership Archetypes

"Traditionally, leaders are told to lead by example and tend to shove their struggles aside to be the inspiration that they think their team needs. It can feel like you can't be tired, emotional, or upset."

Interviewee: male, Millennial, Asian, Owner, healthcare industry

History has taught leaders not to expect to have their mental health struggles acknowledged, understood, or supported. But history alone hasn't done this; our biology has, too. Let's start there. Humans have a natural need for protection and guidance, whether from environmental factors or other members of our species, no matter how much of a *#Rebel* someone is (me included, by the way). Feeling the need for protection from fellow humans or having someone to follow is a deeply ingrained biological drive. We want to feel that someone will "tell us the way," provide us with proper guidance and shield us from harmful surprises in our environment. As group dynamics and social systems evolved to meet these needs, so did the expectations of both those being led and those doing the leading. From my experience working with people, I have found, as Sonny mentioned, that humans are generally predictable and tend to repeat patterns.

Spanning over time and cultures, leadership behaviors have been defined, reinforced, and reinforced again with few challenges to the traditional image. The journal *Current Biology* published a study pointing to this.²

"Leadership is arguably one of the most important themes in the social sciences, permeating all aspects of human social affairs . . . that draw our attention to the fundamental role of leadership and followership . . . Converging ideas and developments in both the natural and social sciences suggest that leadership and followership share common properties across humans and other animals, pointing to ancient roots and evolutionary origins."

In the article, they explore key findings from both the animal kingdom and our human ancestors, demonstrating how modern leadership and followership are shaped and inspired by our own evolutionary history as a species. And, how our evolutionary history contributes to our understanding, and even predicts, modern leadership behaviors today. Some popular examples we often think of include the Alpha, the King, the General, or the Elected Government Representative. Numerous contextual factors also compound and influence these evolutionarily driven archetypes, and we'll examine them more closely in Chapter 5.

Regardless of the role and its differences, each archetype shares common themes: maintaining trust, accountability, managing threats, navigating power struggles, and ensuring survival while adapting to the changing social norms within which they operate. They also share similar expectations for emotions and behaviors. There is an understood “contract” that a leader is a symbol to others and is not just an individual. The more responsibility a leader has, the higher the standards, along with the understanding that they shouldn’t discuss the emotional toll it takes on them. These original archetypes have taught leaders to prioritize the needs of the group they serve and lead above their own and to demonstrate unwavering confidence and resilience, regardless of the cost. What these original leadership archetypes have done is create an image of what people *see* leaders to be and what leaders *are supposed to see themselves as*, excluding their humanity (i.e., dismissing the mental health struggles that *can* and *will* happen in life in general, and in their roles as leaders). This historical pattern has consistently placed a strain on leaders, generation after generation, to seem emotionally impenetrable, when in reality, they are not, and they never should have been expected to be.

These dynamics still exist today; they simply appear differently now. This doesn’t translate well for the modern leader, who faces a more complex set of demands than ever before in history. Those original archetypes never anticipated the modern pressures of working a job, receiving endless information about multidirectional evaluation for a promotion, or the risk of being canceled online. Despite being challenged over time, social expectations have not (and sometimes seemingly won’t) catch up with our current reality, seemingly locked in by these pervasive illogical myths. Ultimately, keeping leaders in systems where they’re deterred from vocalizing their dissenting experiences, while maintaining emotional chlorination for show. Being expected to act seemingly error-free, with positive associations linked to their ability to do so. Error-free? One of my least favorite oxymorons and unnatural inclusions within any conversation about humanity. Why and how has this been

maintained? Through the upholding of social perception and norms, influenced by the power of storytelling.

The Influence of Perception, Storytelling, and Social Norms

Storytelling shapes socially shared narratives because we find meaning through stories and experiences. Repeated stories and long-term narratives can be challenging to change, regardless of the topic. Strongly held social narratives influence how we see things, the biases we develop, the social rules we make, how we organize ourselves, and what we expect from the world—and from the people around us. We apply this to groups by creating the unwritten or unspoken rules or standards of acceptable behavior within a social group³—especially leaders.

And, like everything else shaped over time through storytelling, the social expectations surrounding leadership behaviors—especially those related to emotional distress—are no exception. When people share their experiences about those who have led them, these stories are ultimately categorized as either “good” or “bad.” These labels are inherently binary, subjective, and limited terms that don’t account for the full spectrum of behavior and experiences. However, humans rely on these mental heuristics⁴ (i.e., cognitive shortcuts) to instantly categorize people’s actions in the blink of an eye; therefore, I’ll use those terms for simplicity. To explore the often-overlooked realm of leadership mental health and challenge the ideas that many have clung to over time, we need to examine how ongoing storytelling and narratives have shaped the image of “good” leadership behaviors and how that affects our social expectations of leaders’ emotional expressions. Resulting in two types of influence:

1. What team members, organizations, and society at large perceive and expect good leadership behaviors to be (i.e., social perception); and
2. What leaders perceive and expect of themselves behaviorally in those roles (i.e., self-perception).

Navigating Social Perceptions, and Self-Perceptions, of “Good” Leadership Behaviors

“As a leader, there are inherently higher expectations placed on you . . . Coupled with the personal pressure of not wanting to fail, I found myself very close to rock bottom.”

Interviewee: female, Millennial, Black, Senior Vice President in the C-Suite, heavy civil construction industry

“It can feel like you aren’t allowed to feel your own feelings . . . Sometimes I feel embarrassed or ashamed if I feel tired, strained, injured—and try to play it down or hide it. Even knowing we’re all human and feel this way sometimes.”

Interviewee: male, Millennial, Asian, Owner, healthcare industry

The Social Cognitive Model of Leadership Perceptions⁵ tells us that our species generally and collectively agrees that a leadership role prioritizes displaying specific behaviors. We scrutinize those in leadership roles to ensure they display the following:

Strength, decisiveness, trust, credibility, and stoicism.

When we observe others who naturally, or at least visibly, display these behaviors or traits, we tend to find it easier to attribute power to them because we’ve automatically assumed they are capable (i.e., this is how leaders act; thus, we believe they can handle it). We have strong mental reference points about what good leadership behaviors look like. This, in turn, influences how we evaluate current or potential leaders. Sometimes, this will even go to an extreme. A piece in *Psychology Today* citing a 2023 study published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* showed why people are even drawn to following, and I quote, “tyrannical leaders.” Why would people be drawn to tyrannical leaders, especially today, with what we’ve seen them do? Because some people may subconsciously associate that type of leader with someone who can effectively protect them.⁶ In effect, their modern ideas are driven by their original homo sapien software.

Let's consider team perceptions of leaders. In 2023, *Leadership Quarterly* highlighted a study on team cognition and its contribution to understanding leadership. When teams evaluate, judge, and interpret the behaviors of leaders,⁷ this is how those team members tend to assess and cognitively organize their thoughts about leaders. I'm using "we" to describe our patterns as a species,

- *We create mental representations of leaders:* we archetype what good leaders look and act like, shaped by cultural context and previous interactions with other leaders.
 - Ironically enough, while writing this book, I had a meeting with someone and shared my central thesis. Just by merely mentioning that leadership mental health is objectively important, I visibly triggered this person. They immediately launched into a rant about all the leaders who had failed them throughout their career and all of the horrible things "they see online," ultimately resulting in this person saying, and I quote: "I don't care how leaders are doing anymore." When I validated their experiences, which were unfortunate and unwarranted, I also explained that just because those leaders were ineffective and took negative actions, doesn't mean that all leaders are like this, and that leadership mental health is still an important topic to discuss. But it didn't matter to them, and my sentiment was dismissed. All of those leadership representatives who failed this person had robbed them of any desire to remember that leaders are still human beings, and that not all individuals and the actions they take are representative of the same group. And what this person had seen on social media and the internet cemented all those feelings, in concrete.
- *We interpret the behavior of leaders:* we do this constantly, accurately or not. We interpret why leaders do what they do based on our preexisting prototypes of what we consider a good or effective leader.
 - Side note: Psychoanalyst and anthropologist Michael Maccoby published a fascinating piece in *Harvard Business*

Review (HBR) highlighting how people are often drawn to leaders who resemble a mental representation of important people from their past, such as a close friend, parent, sibling, or other type of caregiver (also known as transference).⁸ Translation: We are drawn to leaders who we feel will protect us. Conversely, we may also naturally fight against leaders for the very same reason (which we'll unpack more in Chapter 4).

- *We attribute meaning to leaders' behavior*: we theorize what a leader's behaviors or words mean, consider the situation in which they occur, and then fill in the blanks about their potential intentions (accurate or not).
 - We connect this to what we believe they were trying to achieve when they acted or spoke in a certain way. This phenomenon is especially evident when we encounter a new leader⁹ (i.e., they are judged by all who came before them). This process can happen almost instantaneously and goes uninterrupted unless the perceiver and the one being perceived quickly compare notes.

Based on how we tend to mentally organize our views of good leaders, and knowing this, wouldn't it create a compelling push for them to predominantly display those good leadership behaviors at work? The motivation is strong to avoid creating opportunities for doubt by not veering off script into the messy realities of the human struggles they still experience behind their socially attributed power. Power dynamics are not just real and palpable to those who are led, but also to those who lead.

Cue Dr. Robert Cialdini's *The Principles of Influence*.¹⁰ I frequently refer to his principles when I work with leaders on communication and team dynamics. Among Cialdini's seven principles, I've always felt that the Laws of Authority and Consistency unintentionally overshadow the reality that leaders can be effective while grappling with their mental health. The Law of Authority states that we view individuals favorably who can demonstrate authority and expertise. The Law of Consistency says that we favor those who are steadfast in their

decisions and commentary. If we look to leaders for consistency and authority, we're not exactly preparing ourselves to be receptive to or readily accept witnessing struggles or behavioral variance from those who lead.

"I worked for a VP who broke me emotionally and mentally . . . I never felt I was good enough. He would criticize me in front of the team that I lead. I don't remember a time that we were together when I didn't cry in front of him. It seemed that he wanted to break me. It took years of intensive therapy to heal from the trauma of this experience."

Interviewee: female, Baby Boomer, Caucasian, Director,
beauty industry

Not only are leaders evaluated by everyone around them, but they also put perceptual and social norm pressures on themselves. Sometimes, leaders even propagate these expectations among themselves (which we'll discuss more in Chapter 5). The toxicity of paying the wrong thing forward, if you will. People in leadership positions are part of and self-identify as part of a social group (i.e., leaders). Social Identity Theory¹¹ suggests that leaders compare their identity to, and are influenced by, the identities of other leaders within the same group. This informs what it means to be "good" and deemed acceptable to lead, to themselves, their peers, and by those they lead. Individuals then self-impose expectations to display those idyllic qualities to positively represent the group they're a part of (i.e., I need to fit the profile). Sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of Impression Management from his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, reinforces this by explaining that, "Impression management not only influences how one is treated by other people, but is an essential part of social interaction."¹² Ergo, if leaders want to be perceived in a certain way, they must constantly prioritize how they manage the impressions of onlookers, for fear of being doubted and losing credibility, or maintaining their position.

What do all these theories have in common? Society has conditioned both followers and leaders to believe that prioritizing emotional health support for leadership is not only unimportant but also signals weakness or an inability to lead. When actually, the reverse is true. Those are some crappy co-created bylaws if you ask me. Here is the wrinkle in ye olde faulty logic (please allow my teeny-tiny nihilist to come out for a moment). We have agreed upon a practice called “work.” Created industries, job titles, companies, services, and products for other humans—all with (generally) agreed-upon purposes. Over millennia, this has given us purpose, meaning, and kept us busy during our time alive on this pale blue dot floating around the universe before we shuffle off this mortal coil. Now, color me crazy (no, we don’t use that C word, but for the sake of the argument, I am), but the last time I checked, leaders are the same species as us. Let’s follow the logic line:

- Leaders are human beings.
- Human beings have mental health.
- Ergo, leaders have mental health.
- Thus, leaders can experience the full spectrum of emotions and mental health struggles, like anyone else who doesn’t hold a leadership title. (Side note: there are obviously exceptions to this, as some people, regardless of position, do not experience the full spectrum of emotion for a variety of medical and psychological reasons.)

As part of this evolution, we, as a species and a self-organizing society, have automatically assumed and acted as if leaders are immune to needing emotional support in their roles. Not to seem obnoxiously logical, but since leaders are the same species as those they lead, shouldn’t leaders receive the same mental health considerations as those not in leadership roles? The biological and sociological programming nestled deep in our collective psyche has resulted in a seriously flawed belief that leaders must rid themselves of their humanity and program themselves out of showing any form

of emotional struggle to be trusted as a “good” leader. A vicious cycle cemented and perpetuated by those who lead and those who are led:

- Leaders were historically encouraged to display a certain set of behaviors that were socially approved signs of “good” leadership.
- Leaders (generally) continued to do this.
- Then, an assumption was created that leaders would not need support, because they are, and must be, self-sustaining.
- Leaders are motivated not to show struggle or a need for support.
- Leaders don’t receive support, creating additional challenges to manage emotional health, potentially impacting their overall functioning, how they behave, and lead.
- Leaders then act in ways that may damage their reputation or negatively impact those they lead. Causing others to doubt their abilities, when they were never given a net to fall onto if they fell from the pedestal people put them on.

Yes, this is as ridiculous as it sounds. Yes, it felt even more ridiculous for me to have to write it.

History Has Set Up Leadership Mental Health to Fail

*“Many leaders are afraid of speaking about their mental health because of judgment, loss of authority or credibility, or other reasons that are ultimately rooted in fear. The workspace is not always a safe space for full self-expression, especially when speaking with team members who work under you. There is an implied expectation that as a manager, you ‘have your sh*t together’ and anything that causes wavering is kept to oneself.”*

Interviewee: male, Millennial, Caucasian, Director, technology industry

“Being a leader has had a profound impact on my mental health. On one hand, leadership has given me a sense of purpose, the ability to create change, and the opportunity to support others. On the other

hand, it has often come with immense pressure, emotional exhaustion, and the weight of constant vigilance.”

Interviewee: male, Gen X, Black, first-time manager, technology industry

Leadership mental health has been set up to fail from the beginning, with struggles hidden like the bottom of an iceberg as a measure of success for professional competence and emotional strength.

The Automatic Continuation of False Correlations and Conflicting Expectations

Despite the irrefutable logic, we continue to uphold a false correlation that being a leader means one cannot, and should not, simultaneously face emotional health struggles. That’s just nonsense, and we know it. Who has articulated this the best? I hope you love this as much as I did when I heard it for the first time,

“I have no difficulty holding both logic and feeling at the same time. And it does not diminish my powers. It expands them.”¹³

—**Lawyer Barbie, from the 2023 film *Barbie***

While this commentary from the movie primarily centers on the intersection of gender and decision-making in influential positions (which we’ll delve into in Chapter 5), wouldn’t it be nice if this logic were generally applied to what we expect and accept around leadership displays of emotional struggle? Ironically, quotes like this and others from that movie have not been appreciated for the brilliance and truth they satirically implied; instead, they forced the certain evaluative bodies deciding whether this phenomenal movie deserved an award to feel uncomfortable with the truths they unveiled in an undeniable way. I’m going to go ahead and say that the palpable discomfort that ripped its way through the powers of Hollywood mirrors the World of

Work and how twitchy it makes people feel to even consider addressing the mental health challenges and needs of leaders. Maybe it's too scary, like in *The Matrix*, where the decision is whether or not to take the "perception-opening" red pill because you can't go back once you've done it.

Corroborating what both Lawyer Barbie, and I, have said, *MIT Sloan Management Review* published a piece called "The Emotional Landscape of Leadership."¹⁴ It highlighted that leaders can face various emotional health challenges and negative emotions simply because of the nature of their role and that this is part of being a leader (i.e., emotional challenges occur alongside their ability to lead). The piece also refers to a study published in the journal *BMJ Leader* (focusing on leadership in healthcare). In this study, the researchers found that ". . . about 58% of respondents confessed to experiencing anxiety when faced with critical decision-making, while almost half (49%) said they felt apprehensive about potential missteps being viewed critically by superiors." This shows that a leader *can* experience emotional distress while still maintaining their intellectual and professional capabilities. These elements are not in conflict. They co-exist. They are signs of a human and capable leader who endures their own emotional distress while simultaneously leading others, and they are not permitted to have a socially acceptable or nonjudgmental avenue to be honest about that. The leadership emotional capacity cup must just automatically continuously self-refill, right? Said no one.

All of the historical conditioning that has led us to where we are now has created completely unhealthy, unrealistic, and unsustainable conflicting expectations for our modern-day leaders. The ridiculous, continual emphasis on unwavering emotional composure discourages leaders from displaying emotional struggles or discussing their mental health at work. To top it off, as we'll look at in Chapter 4, leaders are also constantly pressured to perform, maintain, and even establish a "healthy" workplace culture while supporting their team's mental health. Yet, they aren't allowed to engage in it for themselves.

In my experience, creating change involves three stages:

1. Looking back to see where we came from and what we can learn from that.
2. Observing our current state (the relics from the past we still hold on to, the problems they may be causing, and the reasons why).
3. Focusing on our intended outcomes (the objectives we establish to create change from what we aim to avoid repeating and why).

We finished the first stage in this chapter. In the next three chapters, we'll explore the second stage. Through looking at the ongoing dehumanization of leaders, the de-prioritization and exclusion of leadership mental health in the workplace, the growing burden of leadership tasks, and the overall impact of this toxic mix that leaders are force-fed. All the while, still influenced by remnants of the past.

P.S. Look out for the start of *The Weight on Leadership Mental Health Equation* in the next chapter.

Individual Reflection Questions

- As a leader, do I feel I should talk about my mental health at work? Why or why not?
- Where do my beliefs come from? Which experiences (or people) taught me to feel this way?
- If I talk about my emotional struggles as a leader, what will this “mean”? Why do I feel this way?

Chapter Key Takeaways

- Leadership has been historically dehumanized.
- Leaders have been conditioned to internalize unrealistic expectations of themselves.
- Society perpetuates a false correlation between emotional vulnerability and leadership incapability.
- Leaders operate in a broken professional system that rewards composure and silence while penalizing the expression of struggle and a need for support.
- Leadership capacity and mental health struggles can co-exist.