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Leaders Shouldn't Be Lonely

Key Takeaways

- Leadership is lonely, but leaders don't need to be. Isolation and disconnection happen when you lead alone with no relational investors to show you your potential pitfalls or blind spots. Disconnected leaders can derail a company.
- Up to 67% of leaders derail or fail in their role and isolation is a key factor. These leadership failures cost organizations billions of dollars a year.
- The antidote to isolation and derailment is to become intentional about surrounding yourself with a circle of relational investors, your personal advisory board.
- Your trust circle helps you to become a leader who stands the test of time so that you can navigate critical transitions and serve others to your full capacity.
- To prepare for scale, sale, or succession you need relational investors who will stretch you to your next level, support you in your darkest hour, and strategically position you for success.

Leadership is lonely. When things go well in our work or our world, we sometimes give leaders more credit than they deserve. More often though, we don't give our best leaders enough appreciation or the support they need for the myriad of ways that they absorb our pain or create possibilities. Healthy leaders matter for families, workplaces, and communities. Leaders who stand the test of time realize and prioritize the need for meaningful, authentic relationships that stretch them, support them, and strategically position them. This social infrastructure is key to making leaders last. In this chapter, we'll talk about the importance of building your trust circle and how the right connections are the antidote to lonely leadership.

Social Infrastructure

In the Seattle area, where I grew up, it doesn't snow heavily very often. We're known more for rain and gray skies, but once every couple of years the region will get a few inches of snow, and the city slows to a halt. Schools and businesses will have later starting times until the snow melts, and then everything is back on track. But every 8–10 years Seattle gets a lot of snow, and the city is usually unprepared. The city shuts down due to the steep hills and the lack of snowplows and infrastructure designed for the occasion.

When this big snow comes, Seattle will occasionally lose power for a day or so. It's amazing what happens when the power goes out. After your batteries run out, you quickly realize just how much you rely on electricity. You can't hop online to check emails, post on social media, and depending on your appliances, you might not even have hot water or the ability to cook on your stovetop. In developed nations we take the incredible amount of infrastructure that moves life along for granted, until it suddenly turns off. In those moments, you can't help but recognize the networks that your life runs off, networks that you normally don't pay attention to: systems of power, plumbing and sewer, disposal of garbage and recycling, transit systems of highways and roads with public transportation. It's an ecosystem that you're largely unaware of in the background of

life. The networks of relationships across our work and lives are similar in many ways. We take our social infrastructure for granted until we face the need to rely on them.

Without intentional relationships, we won't be able to serve others to our full capacity or navigate major business transitions smoothly. If there is one thing that can keep the metaphorical lights on and the water running for you as a leader, it's relationships with people who can surround you to stretch you, support you, and invest in you in strategic ways. The stakes are high and the need for support matters.

The Impossible Job of Leading

Can you imagine what it would be like if there was no one leading in the places you live and work? Leaders drive change and marshal people forward together to solve the most challenging problems in the world. You could be leading a business through a major organizational transformation to position for scale, sale, or succession or you could be running a nonprofit that's combating human trafficking in the slums. Every single one of those opportunities and challenges is fueled by the courageous efforts of leaders like you. Leaders who will undergo immense amounts of pressure, self-doubt, work-life balance issues, and innumerable highs and lows, to make each mission a reality. Your leadership makes your organization work.

In many workplaces, our expectations of leaders unintentionally set them up for failure. As a leader, people expect you to be a super-human who will solve all their needs. People demand that you be hyper-connected and always available, yet they expect you to model work-life balance and effective time management. You are asked to be authentic and transparent, candidly sharing your struggles and fears but at the same time staying positive, inspiring, and composed in the middle of storms where the personal outcome for you is uncertain. Your team wants you to include people in decisions, while simultaneously being strong and decisive, casting and keeping a compelling vision without wavering back and forth. They want you to have bold convictions but at the same time they want you to be humble, willing

to request and receive critical feedback. Leading is an impossible task. The act of leading is full of tensions.

It's time to revisit how you get the support you need. People are relational. We're designed for meaningful connections. Relationships are your social infrastructure. Leading is a high-stakes endeavor but, in most cases, leaders aren't equipped with the relational support they need to thrive and flourish for the long game. You need relational investors who stretch you to your next level, support you in your darkest hour, and strategically position you for success.

No matter your leadership level and role complexity or the context or industry, there is a critical need for you to surround yourself with a circle of intentional relationships, your own personal board of advisors. You need people around you whom you can trust. People who will both have your back and point out your blind spots. Leadership can be lonely, but leaders shouldn't be.

No One Leads Alone

Tina is a leader who understood the importance of relational investors. She was a rising executive in a global organization. She had a tremendous amount of responsibility and enjoyed her role overall, but she found herself being considered for a next-level opportunity as one of the top officers in the organization. This role would elevate her to an elite status and provide increased influence with some of the top leaders in the world across divergent disciplines. The role would also come with increased visibility to the media and public eye. It was a big role, and as she was preparing for her internal candidacy, I worked with her as a coach to thoughtfully craft her personal brand and position herself for the promotion.

One of the tactical items we worked on was her résumé. Résumés serve as a tool to narrate your career and tell the story of the value you bring. It's inspiring to hear the stories of people who have accomplished impressive feats, and she was a delight to speak with—a bold, confident, yet humble woman who inspired and empowered people with her

presence. Tina's résumé was loaded with achievements and impact, but it was nearly impossible to work with her to position her personal brand.

The problem was that any time I tried to get her to tell me what she accomplished, she'd answer by describing the incredible team she had or a vendor who'd been an especially helpful partner or a mentor who had guided her wisely. Her inclusive approach was fine for the first few line items, but as we moved to her more impressive accomplishments, she kept pointing to the people around her. I started getting frustrated. "Tina, tell me what you actually did yourself. Having a great team and great partners across the business is fantastic, but none of them are interviewing for this role. We need to tell your story with your personal brand." Tina's response, with not even a twinge of frustration, caught me off guard: "I know that I need to share what my role in the projects was, but honestly, that's why it's so hard to write my résumé. When I look at anything meaningful that I've been a part of, the results are always due to a community of people around me. There's no way I could do any of those things on my own. I don't know anyone who does anything without other people."

Tina was right. No leader accomplishes anything meaningful in a vacuum. In fact, when you start to peel back the layers on any résumé line item, you quickly start to see that no one is a self-made leader. Even if you've had a challenging journey, at some point along the way, someone has invested in you, supported you, opened a door for you, or sacrificed for you. The whole story is that Tina was incredibly accomplished because she knew how to harness the energy of other people and how to build the right relationships around her. She accomplished more because of the people around her, and they didn't support her by accident.

Leaders Derail Without Support

Tina knew something that can take many of us a long time to realize—a successful life or career is enabled by the social infrastructure of relationships that we participate in. The reality is that the more responsibility or influence a leader has, the more isolated they often find themselves—even though higher stakes and complexity require greater support.

Behind every successful movement, initiative, product, organization, or family system are leaders who are stepping out and going first, catalyzing groups of people with vision or designing systems and processes that hopefully enable humans and communities to flourish. We need healthy sustainable leaders, and healthy leaders need relational investors.

Take the steep costs of executive derailment. Leadership researchers Joyce and Robert Hogan along with Robert Kaiser synthesized the research on leadership derailment and reported that between 30% to 67% of leaders fail in their role,¹ costing organizations billions of dollars a year.²

Take Alex Boyd, for example. Alex was facing a crisis. His energy consulting business had plateaued, and he was being weighed down with operational leadership that prevented him from strategic thinking and planning. Because Alex had filled many roles in the company, he'd developed a generalist skillset that was valuable because he could address varying needs, but dangerous because it kept him spread thin and unfocused on steering the direction of the company. He described how one day he realized that he was part of the problem, "I could do every job in the company—so I did. And that was the problem." He realized that he needed to restructure his team and allow his leaders to solve the operational problems in the business. He hired a COO and elevated his role to focus on the strategic thinking. As his time freed up, he confessed that he felt guilty for spending his time thinking instead of fighting fires. But he began to realize that this was how his leadership team could support him and how he could create space for them to run their business units most effectively. Today, his team pushes him to stay at the right altitude, and he was able to avoid a leadership career shipwreck. Now he has energy and focus to guide the business to the next level.

When you look at the top reasons that leaders derail or fail, relationships are always a major theme.³ Not only are the financial implications staggering, but the impact on the people involved in an unsuccessful leadership transition can be debilitating. Failed leadership transitions erode the productivity and morale of the team who was caught up in

the crash. The leader must now recover from a career setback or even a full-on derailment. Leadership failures have real implications.

This issue isn't unique to corporations and businesses. Even in higher education, an industry known for tenure and longevity, the average time in a university president role is only six and half years and decreasing,⁴ and the average business school dean, a challenging mid-level executive role, is estimated to last only five years or less.⁵ Leadership longevity is a problem in every industry. You need to be connected to relationships who are invested in keeping you on track.

The Isolation Trap

It's clear that we're hard-wired for connection.⁶ Empirical research across psychology and the social sciences underscores Tina's experience in her life and work and yours too. Social support, in different forms, is a foundational part of healthy and happy living, from links to happiness and longevity, mental health, or even thriving for newborns and babies.⁷ Leaders need connection. It's dangerous when leaders lead alone.

Isolation is the result of leading alone. An isolated leader is disconnected with no one to show them the potential pitfalls in front of them or to shed light on the blind spots around them. Being unaware of blind spots is a key reason that leaders derail.⁸ If you have no one giving you candid, honest feedback, you'll never realize your fatal flaws till it's too late. Isolated leaders also carry the full weight of responsibility without anyone to shoulder their burdens. The weight of leading falls solely on them. At first, it's possible to hold up under the pressure but over time gravity usually wins and an isolated leader will be crushed. Isolation causes leaders to falsely believe that they have no one whom they can rely on for support. Isolation means leading alone.

At best, an isolated leader won't lead to their full potential, relying on their own capabilities and limited perspective.⁹ Athletics provides a great example. In nearly every sporting activity, athletes train with other people so that they can go further, become faster, and get stronger. I've witnessed the same in leadership. Connected leaders

refine each other. As the ancient proverb says, “iron sharpens iron.” Think about a leader without mentors for perspective or advisors for input on important decisions. This leader will make decisions in a vacuum only to be surprised by the unintended results. Isolated leaders have fewer relational resources to draw on when making hiring decisions, forming partnerships, or taking big family risks like a major move or job change. Isolation is especially dangerous in critical transitions.

Isolated leaders are disconnected from reality. They find that their businesses don’t carry the value that they believed. Lonely leaders don’t keep pace with scaling, growing operations. The weight of their business demands starts to exceed their leadership capacity and strength. Many times, lonely leaders will hold onto their position too long because it defined their identity. These leaders avoid intentional succession planning because they can’t picture life beyond their business.

At worst, an isolated leader can seriously hurt the people whom they are supposed to lead and even derail themselves. Think about the leadership scandals that hit the news: pastors, politicians, professors, and company presidents. The next time you see a leader who derails in some way, look for potential signs of isolation. While it’s not the only factor, it’s often a strong and contributing one.

Leaders who have people around them have built-in checks and balances, whether liked or not, to temper their thinking and question their decisions. These relationships can help leaders compensate for their weaknesses. Every leader needs people to care for them or counterbalance them. When you are surrounded by an intentional circle of relationships, it creates a safety net to catch you when you stumble. Better yet, it provides a personal board of advisors to perceive the peril ahead and navigate around it. Whoever is in your circle of relational investors, they can make the difference in your direction.

One example is Rich and Steve Gund, two brothers who forged a relationship that went beyond business and further than family. The Gund brothers took over a dysfunctional family business together. When they took over the business, the prior generation’s

relationships were toxic, and the business was stagnated. The brothers have complementary talents and different perspectives but a willingness to practice humility with each other. They realized that their ability to work together could be a difference maker. Rich describes himself as Mr. Inside, focused on operations and finance, with Steve taking on the role of Mr. Outside, focused on sales, marketing, and purchasing. From day one, they decided to align themselves on something bigger than themselves. They see the business as a vehicle for a life of purpose, not privilege, for themselves and their employees.

Together, they've relied on each other in an uncommon way. They work intentionally on their relationship, fine-tuning their trust in each other and allowing them to handle difficult family issues with dignity and respect. They've also intentionally been there for each other. Rich and Steve said, "When one of us gets tired, the other takes the baton and runs the next leg." They described their relationship as a healthy business marriage, a true partnership together in life and in work. The Gund brothers proved that isolation doesn't have to be the storyline and that connection is a powerful foundation for a leadership partnership.

So how does isolation happen? Some leaders purposefully isolate themselves to gain power or control. I've seen leaders intentionally design organizational systems that have fewer accountability mechanisms to challenge their vision or ideals. Isolation can be a choice, a protective mechanism so that they aren't challenged. Yet, most leaders don't set out to become isolated. Many lonely leaders slowly drift into isolation over time as they grow in responsibility.

The very nature of the role of leader is isolating.¹⁰ It takes a great deal of intentionality and persistence to resist the fallacy of self-reliance. You are trusted with information that you must hold in solidarity, sometimes legally unable to share the burden that you are shouldering. Many leaders might not know who to trust. Does a team member genuinely want to help and assist you, or are they angling to position themselves for the next promotion? Which people on your team are smiling to your face and gossiping behind your back? Many

leaders I've worked with desperately crave someone to talk to, but they don't know who or where to turn for advice or support or insight.

Other leaders want to grow and develop, but they don't receive enough quality feedback on how people perceive them. Criticism and complaints don't count. Awareness about the problems in the organization doesn't necessarily constitute as helpful feedback. When feedback is delivered, it's often met with skepticism. What are the motives of the person who shared the feedback? What's their agenda? It can be hard to filter what to heed and what to ignore. It takes intentional efforts to fight the inertia of isolation when you are leading.

Isolation isn't just a work issue. Countless leaders I've coached confess that the pressure of family obligations alongside a challenging job leave them feeling as though they have no place to get support. CEO owners often feel this the most. They feel personal responsibility for the business and the livelihood of their employees. The pressure can be overwhelming. Sometimes this gets exhibited in anger and impatience with their family members or in emotional distance to maintain the energy to survive another day. The ripple effects of isolation carry further than the workplace.

Unfortunately, isolated leaders are often the rule, not the exception. It's why I wrote this book. The antidote is the power of having the right relationships across the domains and seasons of life. The good news is that many leaders already have the relationships that they need—their circle is available, just not activated. Accessing those relationships is worth it.

A Road Map for Relationships

You don't need to lead by yourself. Surrounding yourself with the right people and becoming more intentional with the relationships you already have is a powerful way to increase your effectiveness now and for the long term. How do you get more intentional about surrounding yourself with the circle of relational investors you need?

In Chapter 2 we will learn about the architecture of an effective leadership circle, an intentional set of relationships that you can access for support, stretch, and strategy. Let's get intentional about getting connected.

Reflection Questions

- Leadership carries many expectations. What expectations do you have for yourself as a leader? What expectations do other people have for you? How do those expectations impact you, personally and professionally?
- What parts of your role as a leader cause you to drift toward isolation and loneliness? What structures in life keep you connected and protect you from drifting into isolation?
- Who are the most important relational investors in your life today? How does their support make you a better leader?

