

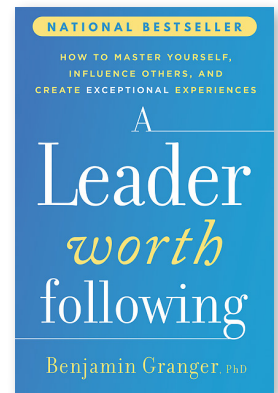


Executive Book Summaries®

A Leader Worth Following

How to Master Yourself, Influence Others, and Create Exceptional Experiences

by **Benjamin Granger**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Leadership in modern organizations is defined by increasing complexity, social dynamics, and the need to influence without relying solely on authority. *A Leader Worth Following* examines the central problem of how leaders can motivate others, build trust, and create environments where people choose to follow. The book advances the thesis that effective leadership begins with self-mastery and extends through empathy, communication, and intentional influence grounded in an understanding of human behavior.

The author presents a structured framework rooted in psychology and experience management, emphasizing that leadership effectiveness depends on understanding how people think, feel, and behave. The work situates organizations as systems of people, resources, and goals, and argues that so-called soft skills—such as communication, emotional awareness, and behavioral insight—are foundational to achieving sustained performance and engagement.

The book develops this framework across three dimensions: mastering oneself, improving interpersonal communication, and shaping environments that influence behavior at scale. It outlines how leaders can refine their thinking, regulate their behavior, and design organizational contexts that reinforce trust, reciprocity, and shared purpose, establishing conditions under which voluntary followership can emerge.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

- Explain how experience management connects human insight to outcomes
- Develop self-mastery through introspection, mindset shifts, and awareness
- Strengthen communication by framing messages and gathering diverse input
- Shape environments that reinforce trust, reciprocity, and performance

Introduction

Throughout my career, I have focused on how to train employees effectively, select the best candidates, measure people's attitudes, and predict what they'll do in the future. Time and time again, I have found that what really makes employees tick, and on the flip side, what demoralizes them, can be traced back to the people who lead them. And the more I study what drives productive consumer attitudes and behaviors, the more convinced I become that leaders hold ultimate responsibility.

If we were to walk around and ask random people about the leaders they follow, we'd probably find that those leaders fall into one of two buckets:

1. Leaders who people follow because they *have to*
2. Leaders who people follow because they *want to*

Sadly, most of us are all too familiar with leaders who fall into the first category, those we follow because we have to, and perhaps, if we're honest with ourselves, we might admit that we've been this type of leader at times. This style of leadership is often deeply rooted in insecurity and painful life experiences. It takes its toll. Let this be a warning: choose this path at your own risk.

The path to becoming a leader people want to follow, on the other hand, takes far more courage. You'll have to sacrifice a lot. You'll have to set aside quick fixes. It requires bravery and hard work. It's not a lazy path, but it is an honorable one. And the fruits of your journey will be immeasurable. By choosing this path, you'll be far more likely to find fulfillment and long-term happiness.

CHAPTER 1

The Daunting Challenges of Modern Leadership

In addition to the normal struggles we face in our daily work lives, leaders shoulder the burdens of others, multiplying the challenges they are responsible for. Leading and influencing people comes with significant responsibility and accountability. Some feel called to lead, while others prefer to avoid it. And that's perfectly normal.

Leading takes serious guts. Organizational leaders are often caught between competing interests, forced to make seemingly impossible decisions with no clear right answer—it's not for the faint of heart.

Humans Have Evolved to Both Lead and Follow

From an evolutionary perspective, the human brain has developed into the impressive organic machine it is today precisely because humans are social.

Our ability to think abstractly, run hypothetical simulations in our minds, and infer others' motivations reflects the most advanced parts of the brain, which are also the youngest and most recently evolved.

The more advanced parts of our brains operate the way they do because we are highly social and work together in groups. In all known human groups, there are social hierarchies. In other words, we're hard-wired to both lead and follow.

Every Organization Has the Same Skeletal Frame

Every organization you've worked for, currently work for, or will ever work for is unique. Each has its own unique fingerprint. But as organizational psychologist Steve Hunt points out in his book *Talent Tectonics*, beneath the surface, all organizations look the same. Stripped to their bare bones, they consist of just three elements:

1. a group of people
2. shared resources
3. shared goals

While the operational and financial aspects of our organizations are extremely important, they are functions of people, resources, and objectives.

First and foremost, organizations are the people that make it up. Organizations are ever-changing; after all, people come and go. But at any given moment, those people collectively *are* the organization itself.

Soft Skills Are the Hard Skills of Leadership

The term soft skills is, fortunately, going out of vogue in modern business vocabulary. But traditionally, many of us have distinguished them from what we refer to as hard skills.

Hard skills is a catchall term for knowledge and abilities that people possess that are directly applicable to a job; for example, using software or coding.

Unlike hard skills, soft skills are largely social in nature. In business, they take the form of empathy, active listening, vulnerability, intentional body language, and storytelling, among others. These are the skills many of the best leaders possess and work diligently to develop. They are the skills that earn volitional followership.

Soft skills are the skills that earn volitional followership.

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Our Desperate Need for Leaders Worth Following

Whether we like it or not, all of us who work with others, see potential in people and processes, and strive to reach that potential *are* already leaders. We all have the ability and responsibility to influence those around us.

And while leadership is indeed “effing hard,” the hard things we do in our careers often end up being the most rewarding. And to be sure, leadership comes with many rewards: the greatest of which go beyond mere surface-level benefits like power and money.

CHAPTER 2

The Business Philosophy of Experience Management

Exceptional experiences, in business, are sadly a little hard to come by. But when we as consumers and employees have a truly excellent experience with an organization, it leaves a lasting impression.

We often see everyday people step toward others to meet their needs and desires. We see people who are willing and able to view the world through others’ lenses and make an effort to improve their experiences. These efforts bring joy not only to those who receive them but also to those who give them in return.

How does an organization scale these behaviors? The short answer: through leaders.

Finding Deeper Meaning in Work

Consider the question: Why do we work?

Underneath this short string of words is a deep question. Take a second to answer it for yourself. Write down the first answer that comes to mind. You may find other reasons popping up—jot those down too.

I’ve asked this question to hundreds of people throughout my career, and nearly everyone I’ve asked eventually articulates many reasons, several of which have nothing to do with money or basic survival.

The Origins of Experience Management

Experience Management (XM) was created by Qualtrics in 2017. While the central idea of XM isn’t novel, the creation of the category helped build a global community of practice, bring historically disparate business functions together, and galvanize the field.

Before Qualtrics created the XM category, the company had established itself as a premier survey tool for a wide range of academic and business research.

By 2015, when I joined the company, we had organized ourselves along four lines of business: market research, product research, customer research, and employee research.

We realized how intimately connected those activities were. And yet, we also realized how siloed these functions were in most organizations. The category of XM was introduced to encompass them all and to impress upon business leaders the inherent interconnection among these fields and their impact on financial results.

What Exactly Is Experience Management (XM)?

In the XM Institute, the research arm of Qualtrics, we formally define XM as: “The discipline of driving actions based on an ongoing flow of insights about how human beings are thinking, feeling, and behaving.”

Now, admittedly, the definition laid out above is a bit formal. Here’s my simple elevator pitch:

XM is a business philosophy: when organizations do right by people (employees and customers), strong financial results tend to follow. To do this, organizations must understand what people want and need. And to do that, they must talk to them—often and through many channels over time.

It enables organizations to look at the world through the lenses of their stakeholders. This philosophy can transform a business and ensure its relevance as the needs and desires of its stakeholders evolve.

It also helps organizations conduct scalable conversations with their stakeholders and better understand their evolving needs and wants. XM empowers leaders to look at the world through the lenses of others.

CHAPTER 3

Leadership Isn't About You ... or Is It?

Our mindsets and behaviors inevitably influence others' thoughts and behaviors, especially those who report to us, buy from us, and look up to us. Our ability and willingness to command our minds and bodies is key to being a leader others *want* to follow. When we use these tactics with good intentions to positively influence the experiences of others, we become leaders worth following.

Leadership is both other- and self-focused. Imagine a team or an entire organization taking ownership of their mindsets and behaviors, managing themselves to positively influence colleagues and customers. In this environment, people are aware of their body language and its impact on others' perceptions, and they take accountability for it.

Born to Lead and Follow

Every discussion of leadership is inherently a discussion of social hierarchies. For many, the word "hierarchy" carries a negative connotation. And yet, like leadership, I believe it's accurate to say that when we speak of any human society or group, social hierarchies of some kind are involved.

Hierarchies, and thus leadership, appear to be an evolved strategy of social living that helps us solve the many problems associated with group coordination.

All leaders possess some degree of social status, but there are different paths to attaining it. Social psychologist Jon Maner identifies two: dominance and prestige. While dominance involves imposing oneself on others, prestige involves sharing one's gifts and, in turn, receiving the social rewards of status.

CHAPTER 4

Create Ongoing Dialogue

Like leadership, communication is foundational to social life and is a primal experience we all share. Communication comes so naturally to most of us that we take this amazing ability for granted.

But if communication is so foundational to social life, why does it break down so often? Why do countless professionals get sent to communication training each year? Shouldn't communication be the simplest of things?

In my experience, strong communication patterns within organizations are hard to establish. Each person views the

world and the groups they belong to—their team, department, or company—through a slightly different lens. As more people join the group, interactions and coordination become increasingly complex.

Others Do Not Read or Hear Your Words as Intended

Communication is the vehicle of leadership. To lead others, we must exchange information. In business, we most often do this through our words.

Unfortunately, when we communicate verbally or in writing, the intended meaning behind our words can be misunderstood or misconstrued. Most often, the string of words we construct appears clear and self-evident to us, and the thought that others could misinterpret it barely registers. We cannot remove ourselves from our human shell to view things truly "objectively." So what are we to do?

Every time you communicate—every time—you must operate under the assumption that not everyone will understand your message the way you intend.

Framing Mental Images

In business, there are a few specific examples of framing you could use because they are intimately connected to the ways in which our brains and minds work.

As a leader, your ability to communicate with others is heavily dependent on how vivid an image you create in their minds. It's also dependent on your ability to view and prepare your message from the perspective of others. This requires time and effort, but you'll certainly improve your leadership and communication skills by applying these principles in your work.

Improving Your 1:1 Meetings

One of the most natural ways we create ongoing dialogue in the workplace is through one-to-one meetings. These meetings are pervasive because they benefit both parties tremendously. People's aversion to them often stems from *how* they're run. Indeed, the benefits of 1:1s only emerge when they're conducted well.

Effective 1:1 meetings share several key characteristics. Professor Steven Rogelberg, the world's leading expert in meeting science and fellow organizational psychologist, has published extensively on the topic. Here are a few of my favorite takeaways from his work:

When organizations do right by people,
strong financial results tend to follow.

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- Direct reports own the agenda.
- Avoid going through a list of status updates.
- In group meetings, pose the agenda items as questions.

Gather Genuine, Diverse Feedback

Some of the most admirable leaders I've worked with are slow to speak in group settings. They often sit in silence early on, waiting until others speak their minds. When I observe leaders who immediately jump in before their subordinates, I observe more conformity and a lack of diversity of thought.

Delaying your contributions in group meetings is a critical habit to grow into, especially when your goals are to drive innovation and creativity.

Soliciting feedback individually and holding your tongue while others speak help generate more genuine and diverse perspectives from those you lead. This brings out the group's collective expertise, which is often more comprehensive and creative than any single individual's perspective alone. Importantly, this approach encourages healthy debate and productive disagreement.

CHAPTER 5

Master Your Mind

In business, our success as leaders is largely defined by our ability to influence others. The operational and financial outcomes we're held accountable to are functions of people, resources, and objectives. A leader's job is essentially to drive people to use shared resources effectively and accomplish shared objectives. All this hinges on leaders' willingness and ability to learn, grow, and improve themselves.

Introspection is the process of intentionally exploring one's own mind. It's not a passive activity nor is it always pleasant. In fact, it can be quite painful to confront parts of ourselves we don't like and reflect on how often we fail to think rationally or behave in ways that are contrary to our goals.

But through introspection, we develop a much deeper relationship with ourselves and can learn to avoid past errors. If we're committed to becoming leaders worth following, introspection is a process I believe we must commit to.

A World of Contrary Truths

As a psychologist, I find the distinction and interplay between objective and subjective reality fascinating. What's especially fascinating to me is that we frequently behave as if these are (or should be) the same. Clearly, they're not.

The universe in which we live is full of contrary truths. It's not nearly as black and white as we perceive. And yet, in modern organizations, we face many pressures that influence us to think digitally. Leaders who waffle or straddle the fence risk being labeled as indecisive. They also risk introducing uncertainty, which can wreak havoc on employees, customers, and organizations.

But one of the most fundamental elements of mastering one's mind is to acknowledge the shortcomings of the mind and to realize that what we normally refer to as "reality" is probably better characterized as "shared subjective reality."

We can improve our decision-making and influence by reorienting our minds to recognize that our social reality is heavily shaped by people's perspectives and is not nearly as black and white as we often assume.

What Shapes Our Perceptions?

One concept to anchor on is what the psychologist and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman calls WYSIATI: "what you see is all there is." Our perspectives essentially shape how we perceive the world around us.

According to Kahneman's research, WYSIATI is at the heart of many human biases and decision-making errors. It is one of the reasons why employees' and executives' perspectives on work issues often differ and why our customers see things differently than the employees who develop and deliver products and services to them.

It is essential for leaders to keep this in mind and remember that what they see and perceive is almost never exactly the same as what others, especially those at lower levels of the organization, see and perceive.

We Are of Two Minds

Thanks to neuroscience, we now know that our brains are organized into different regions, with some specialized neurons

designated for specific functions. Partially because of the regionalization of our brains and partially because our brain's main job is to keep us alive, our minds can be explained as having two systems.

This mental pair is known as:

- **Automatic system:** the always-alert, intuitive part of our minds. It is always active and allows us to respond to our environment automatically.
- **Reflective system:** the more rational system of our minds. When we consider the seemingly simple question "Who am I?" and reflect on ourselves, this is the part of the mind we engage. It directs our conscious attention and supports planning and complex problem-solving.

As a leader, it's crucial to understand this duality. Not only will this help us anticipate and understand employees' and customers' behaviors, but it will help us empathize with them, especially when they slip in their speech or make seemingly unexplainable decisions.

To lead and influence complicated humans toward collective goals, we must learn to acknowledge the shortcomings of our own minds, slow down, and actively engage our reflective system. Importantly, this does *not* mean completely shutting off or ignoring our automatic or emotional responses.

Adopt a Growth Mindset

The American psychologist Carol Dweck has spent much of her career studying the mindsets that drive people to succeed. One of her greatest contributions to our understanding of human psychology in business is her work on fixed and growth mindsets.

Dweck's work has overwhelmingly shown that success is more likely to come when we adopt a "growth mindset." When we do, we acknowledge that we can get better through learning and practice.

Neuroscientific research has shown that people with growth mindsets show increased brain activity after making errors, compared with those with fixed mindsets, and perform better in subsequent tasks after making mistakes earlier on.

Thinking During Times of Stress and Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a particularly pernicious source of stress we all face. The volatility and uncertainty surrounding modern business will very likely increase in the future. From the perspective of our brains and minds, uncertainty means that we

can't easily predict what's going to happen. When our brains don't have the inputs to predict the future, we experience unpleasant feelings.

What can leaders do during these ever-more-common periods of uncertainty? Here are a few ideas:

1. **Make the uncertain certain:** As a leader, if you don't know what's going to happen, say exactly that. That, at least, makes the uncertainty certain.
2. **Clearly share what is certain:** Share what you do know that's certain about the situation.
3. **Provide a path to greater certainty:** Communicate next steps and ways for people to learn more.

CHAPTER 6

Master Your Body

Our ability to control our bodies has direct and lasting effects on those we lead and influence. Over time, your mastery of body language (or lack thereof) will play a significant role in determining your success as a business leader.

Body language is an ancient form of communication. A deeper understanding of why humans communicate nonverbally can help us understand the foundational psychological processes that happen without us even *knowing*.

Even though our brains normally process body language below the level of consciousness, you gain great power by bringing that processing up, putting your finger on it, and making a conscious decision about how to respond. Again, this puts your reflective system in the driver's seat, which can override the subconscious biases and automatic responses that we're all susceptible to.

Finally, a deeper understanding of body language may help you develop greater empathy for those who struggle with it and offer ideas for coaching them.

Key Points to Remember About Body Language

- More is communicated nonverbally than verbally when people interact.
- Make the peer handshake your default. It is an egalitarian gesture that sets the stage for cooperation.
- In most business situations, keep your hands open and palms facing upward. This signals safety and encourages others to speak up.
- Smile and laugh more often. These cues are contagious and help buffer daily stress.

- Use open body postures when interacting with employees and customers.
- In a 1:1 or small group setting, point your feet toward the person you're speaking with. Maintain eye contact without staring; aim for 60–70% of the time.
- When speaking to a large group, make eye contact across the room rather than focusing only on senior leaders or the most engaged listeners.
- Avoid faking facial expressions. It can create a sense that something is off.
- Consider clusters of body language cues rather than overinterpreting a single signal, and always account for context and culture.

CHAPTER 7

Acknowledge the Power of the Environment

How can leaders influence groups of people and create exceptional experiences, both directly and indirectly? To answer this question, we must first take a serious look at the power of the environment.

For better or worse, people are products of their environments. Sometimes this statement is convenient for us as it seemingly allows us to deflect personal responsibility. At other times, it's decidedly inconvenient as it threatens to disrupt the neat, coherent stories we tell ourselves.

The Fundamental Attribution Error

We humans tend to over-attribute other people's behaviors to stable traits that they must possess. In doing so, we erroneously underestimate the effects of the environment and context on people's behavior.

Like other cognitive biases, the fundamental attribution error (FAE) has evolutionary roots. We engage in this bias today because it likely served our ancestors well. When we see someone behaving aggressively, we label them as “aggressive.” When we see someone behaving generously, we label them as “altruistic.” It's easy to see why this tendency was adaptive.

The most important lesson about the FAE is this: when we make mistakes, we often attribute the cause to something or someone else. When others make mistakes, we attribute them to their character—it's just who they are. When we do this, we underestimate the power of the environment.

Proactively Focusing on the Environment

Much has been written about organizational culture, but for our purposes, we can define it as the shared values, beliefs, and behavioral patterns of a group of people.

An organization's culture includes environmental cues and social pressures that affect both employees and customers—whether directly through interactions with employees or indirectly through the company's products and services. In other words, organizational culture creates environments that shape human behavior.

Swiss American business theorist and psychologist Edgar Schein described organizational cultures at three levels:

- **Artifacts:** the visible manifestations of an organization's culture and environment; what employees and customers directly perceive.
- **Values:** not directly observable but reflected in artifacts, shared language, and behavioral norms.
- **Underlying beliefs:** the deeply held assumptions that underpin a company's values.

Artifacts create an observable environment in which employees operate and which customers experience, directly or indirectly. Espousing values that aren't reflected in meaningful, visible behaviors or environmental cues falls flat. Cultural artifacts and environmental cues communicate a great deal. They often signal how others typically behave, which is a powerful influence on human behavior. Leaders must proactively consider the environmental cues that encourage productive employee and customer behavior.

Know Thyself and Thine Environment

It's partially true that we are products of our environments, and it is also partially true that our genetic makeup, personalities, and choices play a big role in determining what we do and say.

Ultimately, leaders who appreciate the power of the environment gain a huge advantage over those who don't. They gain more empathy for others and take a meaningful step from being leaders others follow because *they* have to, to becoming leaders they follow because they *want* to.

CHAPTER 8

Build a Self-Propelling Reciprocity Engine

Reciprocity is a powerful driver of human behavior. It is one of the most powerful and natural levers for business leaders to influence others and create exceptional experiences at scale.

The norm of reciprocity is universal among human societies. Organizations that intentionally (and ethically) leverage and reinforce this principle among employees and customers reap many benefits.

Leaders Are the Pivot Point

What can leaders do when trust among employees and leaders is low? What can leaders do when they want to incite or spur a more productive mindset or behavioral pattern among those who follow them? In a word, lead.

A tried-and-true way to get someone to move toward you is to first move toward them. This is the best approach for leaders to crank up the reciprocity engine. Will this principle work every time? Probably not. Will you get taken advantage of from time to time? Probably, yes. But if you're leading messy, complicated humans, you're going to get burned every now and then no matter what you do.

A proactive approach gives leaders more direct control. As leaders, we must assume our pivotal role in driving group performance, and reciprocity is an essential principle to embrace.

Build a Propensity to Trust

To build a reciprocal trust cycle and create a high-trust environment over time:

- Show you care about people's interests and well-being
- Make yourself accessible
- Look out for "sliding door moments"

Trust among employees and customers is associated with favorable business outcomes. To build an environment that promotes trust, leaders must start the cycle. To earn trust, start by putting trust in others. Building and maintaining a

trusting environment is hard work in the short term, but it pays off in the long run.

CHAPTER 9

Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

The tactics discussed are not silver bullets nor are they immutable. Leaders worth following acknowledge that there is an entire universe of knowledge and understanding yet to be discovered and what we know represents a tiny sliver of all there is to know. One mark of a great leader is openness to asking genuine questions, learning, and improving over time.

Prune Your Perfectionism

The pursuit of perfection is common among ambitious business leaders. Many modern companies acknowledge this and actively try to stem it.

Leaders worth following aren't perfect, and neither are the outputs of their work. They are, however, acutely aware of their blind spots and surround themselves with people who are better than they are in meaningful ways. They remain open to learning and improvement. Remember, this doesn't show weakness. Acting as if one is perfect is what shows weakness instead.

Be More Curious

Being curious comes naturally to some of us. For others, it doesn't. The problem is that a lack of curiosity isn't particularly adaptive in modern business. In the business world, it pays, literally and figuratively, to be curious. How can organizations possibly thrive with incurious leaders? What can we, as leaders, do?

In my own experience, curiosity breeds more curiosity. Answers lead to more questions. To become more curious, ask more questions.

To Know vs. to Do:

Tips for Committing to Change

It's one thing to intellectually agree that we need to change, but it's another to actually do it. To follow through:

- Focus on one thing at a time
- Start with the foundation
- Write down your commitments
- Make your commitments public

- Make it easy on yourself
- Assume the position

CONCLUSION

Be a Leader Worth Following

Leaders worth following are meaningfully different. Instead of aiming to control others through their words and behaviors, they focus on and right-order themselves. Such leaders earn social status through prestige and by adding value to the groups they lead. They also forgo easy, quick fixes. Eager to learn and grow, they recognize that their journey is ongoing. These leaders reflect on how their actions and words impact others and intentionally control themselves for the good of those they lead.

Ultimately, their words and actions bring people together. What is an organizational leader's job if not to bring people inside organizations closer together, to drive people to work together to achieve the goals they share?

Organizations create better experiences for employees, customers, and everyone they interact with when leaders evolve their thinking and actions to see the business world through others' lenses. They then align their words and behaviors.

Over time, organizations that invest in their leaders and the environments they create will achieve stronger financial and operational outcomes.



Dr. Benjamin Granger is Chief Workplace Psychologist at Qualtrics and has more than fifteen years of experience designing and optimizing experience management programs for global organizations. His research has appeared in academic and practitioner outlets including *Forbes*, *CNBC*, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, and *Academy of Management* publications. His insights have also been featured in major media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg*, and *Fortune*. Granger holds a PhD in industrial-organizational psychology from the University of South Florida. He lives in South Louisiana with his family, where he enjoys a quiet, simple life.

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