

Hay Hill Highlights

Leading from a Deeper Place



Hay Hill Partners is a boutique business coaching firm focusing exclusively on working one-to-one with business leaders. Our clients are typically board or Exco members and their direct reports. We each combine deep business experience, with a psychological appreciation and an understanding of the personal challenges of leading. We help our clients find authentic, positive and sustainable ways forward, bringing out the best in them and those they lead.

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Leading From a Deeper Place

The power of knowing who you are in a world of external measures.

Executive Summary

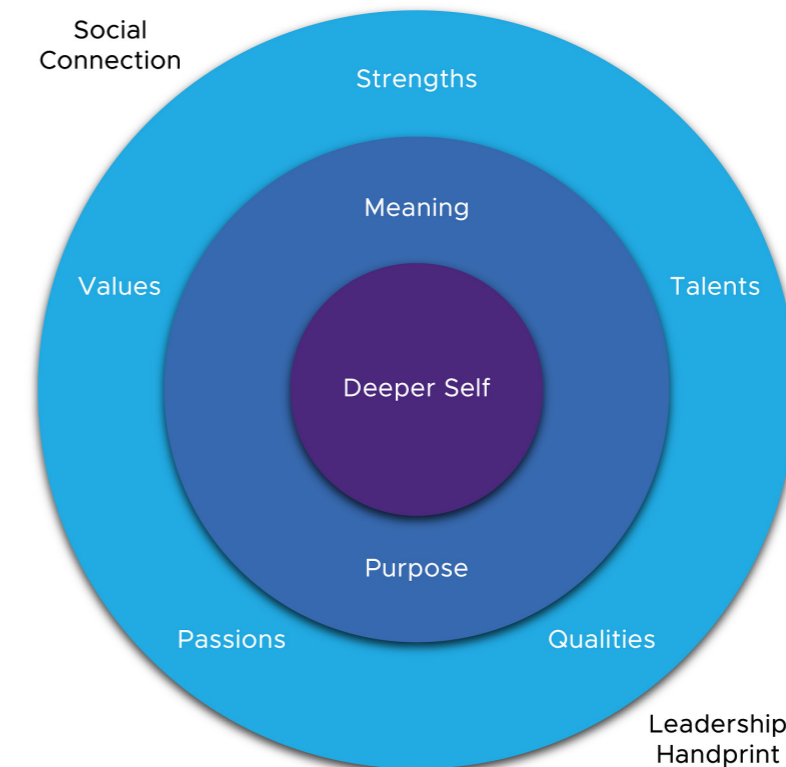
In the modern world it is easy to feel defined by external factors. We are deluged with external pulls driven by consumerism, social media and the pressure to signal virtues aligned with our social position. Holding a senior role, with its associated power and status, can magnify the external validation we receive.

This is a risk to both the organisation and the individual. In tough times, if personal identity is measured predominantly by revenue, profit or the size of a bonus, it can result in challenges to leadership, decision making, or even personal crisis. And even in good times, a world viewed entirely through the prism of external validation can lack depth, meaning and purpose.

A way to deal with this is to step inside and lead from a Deeper Place. The Deeper Place is about tapping into an essential part of ourselves that feels like it speaks to our very essence and what is deeply important about us. Often this Deeper Place is defined by some combination of our strengths, talents, qualities, values, and passions. Also our purpose and our leadership handprint. By definition, it is unique to each of us. It is what we can uniquely bring. When we touch this part of ourselves, we can feel bigger, lighter and more expansive. We are more effective and resilient. And we have a sense of purpose, and of ourselves, that transcends the current situation.

An executive's connection to this Deeper Place can be achieved through an enquiring mind, and a practical framework. The framework I use with my clients is shared below to serve as a roadmap. There are a number of prerequisites – above all, a growth mindset and a willingness to carve out the space for exploration. The good news is, the Deeper Place is easier to access than you may think and most will have addressed some of the elements already!

Through using our strengths and talents, and leaning into a system of leadership, we can get a greater sense of direction. We can discover more about ourselves. We can act with purpose and unlock new reservoirs of creativity. Most will quickly start to feel some enhanced sense of direction.



Introduction

In the modern world it is easy to feel defined by external factors. By our role, what we've seen and done, what we own. We are flooded with external pulls driven by consumerism, social media and the pressure to signal virtues aligned with our social position.

This outer expression of our identity can start to feel like the complete package, rather than just a part of who we are. Senior roles amplify this dynamic: executives can feel defined by their status, power and money. And with power comes less objective feedback. Rather, our ideas will become better and our jokes funnier the more those around us depend on our good opinion. This vacuum of honest feedback in everyday life only serves to magnify the power of the external validation.

This is a risk to both the organisation and the individual, particularly in tough times. In such circumstances, if personal identity is measured predominantly by revenue, profit or the size of a bonus, it can result in inconsistent leadership, misguided decision making, or even personal crisis. And even when times are good, a world viewed entirely through the prism of external validation can lack depth, meaning and purpose, to the detriment of leadership.

A way to deal with this is to step inside ourselves, and to lead from a Deeper Place. It may be useful to think of this Deeper Place as being closer to the totality of who we truly are, as opposed to a version honed and measured by external forces. This article is a practical and simple guide, distilled from many years of working with clients, to finding this place and making it work for us.

What is the Deeper Place?

The Deeper Place is about tapping into an essential part of ourselves that feels like it speaks to our very essence and what is deeply important about us. Often this Deeper Place is defined by some combination of our strengths, talents, qualities, values, and passions. By definition, it is unique to each of us. When we touch this part of ourselves, we can feel bigger, lighter and more expansive. And we are more effective and resilient.

Discovering personal purpose is almost instantaneously motivating. As a client said, you can immediately feel the fizz inside.

A key part of the Deeper Place is connection to the world. It gets its power when it can be expressed outwardly with the aim of having a positive impact in the broader world. A contribution to the world by being relevant to life beyond the individual executive. That external connection tends to bring a greater sense of direction, perspective, meaning and purpose.

The Deeper Place is as much about the journey as the destination. It is about getting closer to the very essence and essential nature of who we are. Its shape and tone will develop over time, and how we express it will evolve.

It is important to note we are not aiming to reach monk-like levels of insight and transcendence, complete with levitation through a cloud of incense. Rather, an executive's connection to this Deeper Place can in fact be achieved through an enquiring mind, and a practical framework. This is also not about completely changing your life and finding yourself living in the wilds working as a forest ranger! Rather, this is about strengthening and deepening your leadership and through this gaining a deeper sense of self, meaning and place. Also, drawing on aspects you may already be using, implicitly or explicitly.

Why Lead from a Deeper Place?

We tend to do better when we make the connection between ourselves and the world in a broader way. This is a further piece in the performance puzzle that can lead to significant incremental gains.

- By developing our interior, we can separate our identity. This inner self is separated from the relentless external challenges and the roles we hold. We feel like we are more than the role. With our sense of self less on the line, we are not as easily thrown when external factors are not in our favour, and so can lead with clarity and vision during turbulent and uncertain times.

In my many years as a business coach, I have come to conclude that personal growth, appropriately pitched and constructed, is fundamental to thriving and happiness.

- Self-knowledge brings a greater surety. Not surprisingly it helps to know who we are and who we want to be. Moving to this deeper level where it is not just about the tangibles of our position and what we

have done, but also about who we are and what we stand for, makes for a compelling leadership presence. With it comes a confidence and authority, often more compelling and balanced than one based solely on external factors like knowledge, experience, position, and status.

- The authenticity goes to the next level. What could be more authentic than knowing who we really are, what we stand for, and acting in line with our strengths and values? There are benefits as a leader from a genuine authenticity in terms of consistency, communication, building trust, and making quality connections with people in the organisation.
- Building a strong inner core brings a deeper equilibrium. This can mean it takes less energy to simply be. This can feel very freeing, as there is not the same need for external validation. And it can lead to greater creativity and insight, as well as better emotional self-regulation.

Having a strong sense of ourselves that transcends our current situation and role is extremely helpful in providing leadership in uncertain times. We know what positive action we expect from ourself, irrespective of the many external forces.

Laying the groundwork to finding the Deeper Place

This is a process that uses structure, logic and reason alongside the more subjective and imaginative. It starts with committing to a process of discovery. This process is not about finding an answer, it is about ongoing learning. It is important not to get lost in self-reflection but to actively try out ideas and see how they feel.

Laying the groundwork for a productive process is absolutely essential. This creates a sense of agency and choice.

- Adopt a personal growth mindset. In my many years as a business coach, I have come to conclude that personal growth, appropriately pitched and constructed, is fundamental to thriving and happiness. It is about cultivating curiosity, taking responsibility, and stepping into expansive, often difficult, situations. It is not shying away from problems and challenges that help us see ourselves and develop our

character. Finding these small moments of bravery to step in and feel, rather than looking for distraction, can make us feel bigger, fuller and richer. An immediate gain.

- Make space for exploration. This is not easy when we are continually busy or distracted, but when we're really busy we disconnect from ourselves and others. You will need to carve out time and use it to step away from distractions.
- Aim beyond survival. Executives need to drive forward and push hard to achieve success at senior levels. But being in the red zone too often can add to the disconnection from ourselves. It's hard to have insights and growth when your primary objective is survival. It is about knowing the times to stop or step aside, rather than always pushing through. This is key to leading yourself and others, in addition helping your journey to a Deeper Place.

Our leadership handprint is fundamental to what drives and motivates us when we are acting in keeping with who we are.

- Recognise the need to nurture yourself. You may need to draw some lines to give yourself sufficient physical and emotional care, whether eating well, exercising, resting, or saying no to something that pushes you towards your limit.
- The willingness to hurt. We learn a lot about who we are by experiencing emotional pain. It can take strength to face into it, but doing so is vital for personal growth. It can be easy to look for distractions when we feel bad. Perhaps a realisation starts to dawn about our past or an important relationship, and we veer away by jumping on Instagram or reading the news. Often hurt can tell us something about what matters to us. For instance, the executive who was bullied at school and now includes fairness as a key part of their credo.

Finding the Deeper Place

Finding the Deeper Place is a powerful process of self-discovery, achieved through practical steps. The approach is intentionally reductive and has been simplified to ensure quick wins and progress as well as providing a framework for ongoing enquiry. It is a process of learning and growth to get closer to who you are at your core. The goal is to honour a deeper part of yourself, giving expression to the fundamental essence of you.

It is not a linear process. Start with the area that has the most draw. It is about developing some ideas, testing them out and discovering ourselves by bumping up against our response. If you get stuck don't worry, just move to a different part of the process and go back later. For those who have already addressed some aspects it is about reviewing and updating, filling in the gaps, looking to make links and create more of a system in the way the elements relate to each other. Either way, it can be helpful to keep some notes as you progress.

Strengths

A good place to begin is to identify strengths and to start to consciously use them. Make a list, recognising that this will be a living list as more is revealed.

- Many of us are attached to particular strengths we have, and so it is important to try and think about our full range of strengths. Reflecting on situations that have gone well, and thinking what we contributed, can help. Asking for feedback can also help us identify the full range.

An executive identified a strength in connecting externally. So they empowered their team to drive forward on more of the internal aspects of the business, and focused on the external partnerships that drove revenue.

- Think how you can use your strengths more often, or in different ways. Are you expressing them in the right way for your executive role?

Think how you have defined them – can this be refined, or moved up a level of seniority? For example from 'action oriented' to 'delivering organisational outcomes'.

- Keep watching for any new versions of a strength that might emerge.
- Keep the list long at this point and then actively start to use them all. This can be a helpful way of broadening our repertoire – by drawing more fully on a broader range of strengths. Take note of the moments that strengths, or particular combinations, leave you feeling particularly good, energised and uplifted.

Talents

Alongside strengths it is important to think about our talents – natural aptitudes or inner qualities that emerge effortlessly and feel good. These often become apparent when we think what we're good at, or particularly love. For instance, being good at complex problem solving, or at reading people and situations.

It was a powerful realisation for an executive that they could use their quick wit and insights to lighten or raise the mood, rather than it being an outlet for cynicism.

Sometimes the deeper part of ourselves is hidden in plain sight. It is something we know about ourselves that feels like it has almost always been this way so we just take it for granted, discount it, or simply don't notice it.

Qualities

When it comes to qualities it is worth thinking of the ones you naturally embody as well as the ones you aspire to, exploring the interconnection between the two. For instance, the executive who, during tough times, wants to embody more of their natural optimism whilst at the same time not denying the hard reality. Or the executive with a natural inclination

to help others develop, who now works to see this as additive and life affirming rather than simply a demand on time.

A leader realised they felt more inspired when they focussed on increasing their teams' levels of work satisfaction and developmental experience.

- From this we start to understand what we uniquely offer and aspire towards. Creating a greater intentionality around using strengths, talents and qualities can help us feel more confident of the situations to step into. It makes it easier to use the strengths of others to compensate for our gaps.
- This understanding can also help to make the future clearer. Future roles can be assessed against the opportunity to use the strengths, talents and what we can uniquely bring. For instance, the executive who saw with greater clarity just how central leading, motivating and developing others was to them. Looking to do more of this guided their thinking about the right move within the organisation.

Passions

Our strengths, talents and qualities are often closely related to what we enjoy and love, but are not exactly the same. It can be helpful to remind ourselves of those things we really enjoy and also matter to us. We can identify what gives the spark of life by watching for when we feel an energy lift, or lighter, or excited.

- Thinking about the things we used to really love can be helpful. Are you still tapping in to this and feeding it? Sometimes we close off parts of ourselves or our roles have only played to a particular narrower version of ourselves. When we identify areas that have limited expression, it can offer important clues to what needs to be bought back in to our lives. For instance, the executive who realised they had left behind their love of the arts, which was a source of creativity and freedom of

expression that could be channelled into problem solving and strategic parts of their role.

- A passion can provide significant future direction. For example, the executive who recalled their passion for transport and so used this as their guide in thinking about NED roles. Or the executive who realised they had left behind their sense of adventure, which, where appropriate, could support bolder leadership.

Values

Values are our enduring beliefs or convictions about what matters about the way we behave. For all the talk of these in business it is interesting how much less emphasis there is on the individual executive's personal values.

- Think through what your values are, and jot them down. It can also be helpful to think where they came from - perhaps a close relationship, a particular experience, or a time of life.
- It is a generally a mistake to try to make an organisation's values your own. It is not usually as convincing or credible. However, what is important is to know the relationship between your values and the company's - how they work together and recognising any points where they may differ.

Most executives are not fulfilled working solely for money, or to support others. There needs to be more.

- It is easy to talk about values. The real test is when they are challenged. We feel better when we behave in accordance with our values. It can really boost our pride and our sense of self.
- Clear values can support simpler and quicker decision making in many situations. For example, the executive brought up by a single mother,

who realised the importance of fairness in ensuring those with less were given an equal opportunity. This led to decisions which helped the most marginalised people in a number of situations.

- The line between clarity and principle on the one hand, and intransigence and zealotry on the other, can be thin. Be careful not to be so attached to your values that you oppress others with them. Also, when we are triggered to respond strongly from our personal values, often we are playing to what is important to us rather than the organisation. The recognition that this is very individual is key, as is providing space for others.

Purpose and Meaning

Many executives feel the need for a greater sense of meaning and purpose that can provide a framework for their career. Discovering personal purpose is almost instantaneously motivating. It is often accompanied by a strong visceral response – as a client said, you can immediately feel the fizz inside.

- While a leader will support the company's purpose, it does not mean they have to share it. Rather, they will benefit from developing their own purpose, distinct from the company. It is this that they can bring as their unique contribution.
- Being able to explain the organisation's purpose, and why it is important, is of course vital. As is understanding how it connects to the executive's own values and beliefs. This enables them to explain when there are initiatives they really support but don't feel significant passion. For instance, they may support diversity initiatives and believe they are very important, but be very passionate about green energy.
- Your purpose has to be for you not for others. Being the main bread winner and providing, for example, a good education for your children, is very important but it is not enough of a purpose. It is not enough to provide for others. Most of us need something that is about us.

- Given that a purpose is personal to us, it is important not to be too evangelical. There may be a limit to how much others want to hear about it. Rather, the aim is to use it in our own efforts to guide, inform and select.
- There can be a pitfall in looking for something too grand, or thinking it needs to change the world. We are looking for something that matters and that connects to what we have to offer.
- It can be helpful to look for crucible moments where our inner self meets the world. Difficult situations may tell us something about our inner resources and remind of us of what is important.

An executive who was bullied at school now plays a key role in promoting fairness, using this very actively to inform how they steer the organisation's approach.

- One way to do this is a top-down method, thinking about powerful or painful moments in our past or early life. If this is relevant to you, these points will typically be readily remembered.
- An example of this is the executive who saw the inequality of money and opportunity across the extended family and took on the purpose of helping people have good jobs and live well. Or the executive who, while hugely appreciative of his parents support for their education, felt uncomfortable that it was funded by his father's work for a tobacco company. He imagined his young child at 25 and what would make them proud of his career, and his purpose became obvious – to look at the use of plastic in the supply chain.
- Another way to identify purpose is to consider the positive impact you would like to have, whether on the lives of those you lead or the broader industry. And then how you can use your platform to deliver positive change in a way that also benefits the organisation.

- If this does not yield anything obvious, there is a bottom up way into purpose, which is to lean into using strengths, talents and passions. By deciding these are key planks of our career we will typically get a sense of direction. For some, having this level of meaning may be enough.

There is little that is more soul-destroying than trying to ignore ourselves. And little that is more motivational and energising than acting in keeping with who we are.

Leadership handprint

The leadership handprint, or philosophy, is important because making a contribution from that place is fulfilling, motivating and life affirming. Coming as it does from a place of energy and authenticity, it will also benefit the organisation and those inside it.

Executives often don't have a succinct way to describe their leadership philosophy, partly because it feels intuitive. And then as we talk, it starts to reveal itself because they are doing it every working day. We begin to see there are beliefs and views about the world, people, and success, underpinning what they do. By thinking *why do I do this?* and *where does this come from?* we get closer to the key elements of a leadership handprint. This handprint is what's central to you as a leader. It is fundamental to what drives and motivates you when you are acting in keeping with who you are.

The leadership handprint brings together the how and why you do the things you do as a leader.

This leadership handprint is typically found by being clear about two things.

- How your system of leadership works and how it helps you get the best out of an organisation and the people in it.
- What it is you are trying to do as a leader. For example, to make work a fairer place, to help colleagues be their best, to create a positive culture, or to develop people with potential.

Think about your answers and check whether there are any areas which are time-expired and would benefit from a revamp. And are there aspects of your leadership handprint where you aspire to be more? Try them out. In watching closely how it works in practice you are likely to discover more aspects of your handprint and also areas for refinement. Then look to see how the handprint can have more power by leaning into your strengths, talents, and passions.

Bringing it all together

The key is to do something with the realisations. Find the golden threads and themes that link all things together. Sometimes circumstances make this hard but it is important to act. There is nothing more soul destroying than trying to ignore oneself. Most people can't work positively just for money and providing for others. There needs to be more.

An executive working to provide a comfortable life for their family felt a tension with their own needs. So they got involved with a charity based in the city they regularly had to travel to for work.

Through using our strengths and talents, and leaning into a system of leadership, we can get a greater sense of direction. And we can discover more about ourselves. We can unlock new reservoirs of creativity. For some the purpose will be obvious, for others more work will be required. Most will quickly start to feel some enhanced sense of direction.

No single realisation is definitive, but if it taps into a Deeper Place it can help to provide a guide to leadership and career decisions. It is also worth thinking about your aspirations for yourself, and then for you as a leader. Is there some stretch that can be added?

It is important to continue to build and to push for greater meaning, asking *what would take this further?* As leaders and as humans we are all works in progress. And discovering more is an exciting and fulfilling prospect.

Acknowledgements

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Examples in this article are from actual conversations and are used with the kind permission of the executives concerned – thank you! Specific details have been removed or adapted in the interests of confidentiality.

Leading from a Deeper Place was written by Dr Jane Stephens, a partner at Hay Hill Partners LLP. Jane has been a one-to-one coach since 2006. During that time, she has worked with executives and entrepreneurs from a range of listed companies, founder led and private-equity backed businesses, as well as professional partnerships.

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