

The Rhythm Of Leadership

Returning To Spirit In A World Of Skill

By **Sam Sukumar**

The Lost Spirit

There was a time when leadership wasn't a skillset—it was a spirit. It lived in people before it was taught in classrooms. It moved through communities before it was measured in outcomes. It didn't begin with ambition. It began with presence. With responsibility. With being the one who didn't look away when the moment asked for something more.

People didn't follow because they were told to. They followed because they trusted what they saw.

And what they saw wasn't always charisma. It was coherence. Quiet strength. Steady love. A kind of clarity that moved through action, not noise.

We've seen this in **Mandela**, who came out of prison not bitter, but grounded. In **Jacinda Ardern**, who held a grieving country with both strength and softness. In **Wangari Maathai**, whose roots ran deeper than any policy. In **Desmond Doss**, the medic who refused to carry a weapon but carried over seventy wounded soldiers to safety.

And we've **seen it** in places **where the spotlight never reaches**.

In **mothers** who organize entire neighborhoods without a single headline.

In **elders** whose silence commands more respect than most speeches.

In **teachers** who shape lives without ever asking to be called leaders.

In **young people** who choose purpose before performance.

In **everyday workers** who make space for belonging without asking for credit.

This is what leadership once was. Not something you reached for. Something you carried—when the moment asked it of you.

The Rise of Skill

Leadership today has become something else. A language. A toolkit. A program. We break it into frameworks, track it through dashboards, coach it with templates. We spend more time defining leadership than embodying it.

And don't get me wrong—skill matters. But *when skill becomes the source of leadership rather than its servant*, **we start to lose the plot.**

We drift.

From wisdom to information.

From conscience to competition.

From inner alignment to outward performance.

We start promoting those who check boxes, not those who build trust. We reward the polished, not the present. We teach people how to lead before asking if they've learned how to follow.

And in the process, we overlook the ones already doing the real work. The caregivers. The quiet ones. The grounded. The ones who don't need a title to live in alignment.

We lift up confidence, but forget connection.

We chase performance, but lose presence.

We grow louder, but not wiser.

The Forgotten Follower

If everyone is leading, who is listening?

In our rush to raise up leaders, we've neglected the sacred work of followership. But the truth is, the greatest leaders have always been remarkable followers.

They followed truth, even when it wasn't popular.

They followed wisdom, even when it meant walking away from comfort.

They followed conscience, not crowds.

Before they ever led others, they followed something deeper within themselves—through silence, through tension, through seasons of not yet knowing.

Followership isn't passivity. It's participation. It's choosing to stay rooted when the world tells you to move faster. It's knowing when to step back, when to hold space, and when to simply sit with what is true.

The ones who follow well often become the ones we trust most when it's time to lead.

Leadership as Rhythm

Leadership and followership aren't opposites. They're **rhythm**.

One is the **inhale**.

The other, the **exhale**.

One **speaks**.

The other **listens**.

One **leads**.

The other **holds**.

In healthy systems—families, teams, communities—these roles are not fixed. They dance. They flow. They adjust to the needs of the moment.

I've written before about the distortion—how leadership drifted from stewardship to outcome engineering. That was *The Leadership Paradox*. But recognizing the drift isn't enough. At some point, we have to find our way back.

This is that return.

To leadership as relationship, not role.

To rhythm, not rigidity.

To embodiment, not performance.

We don't need more leaders.

We need more anchored ones.

Leaders who are not just informed, but transformed.

Not just trained, but trusted.

Not just effective, but aligned.

Let **skill flow from spirit**—not replace it.

Let **presence** come **before performance**.

Let **calling** shape the **direction**—not competition.

Let **conscience** **guide** the strategy.

Let **wisdom** **set** the **pace**.

Because leadership that endures moves to a different beat.

A Practice: Leading with Soul

If you feel called to lead, start within.

Let your leadership rise like a stream becoming a current—quiet at first, but deeply moving.

Begin with **Stillness**—not just pausing, but being fully present. The kind of presence that makes people feel safe to speak. To risk. To stay.

Then **Orient** toward truth—not what's trending, not what's urgent, but what's real. The kind of truth that doesn't shift with every quarterly update.

Lead with **Understanding**—not control. Discern what's actually needed, not just what's expected. Create space for insight before instruction.

And finally, **Lead** from within—not to prove something. Not to impress. But to express what matters. To act from alignment. To embody what you say.

That's what leadership looks like when it has a soul.

A Closing Reflection

I used to think awakening was the beginning. And in some ways, it was. But leadership—true, soulful, embodied leadership—is what happens *after* the awakening. After the letting go. After the returning to yourself.

I had to lose the illusion of leadership to finally see what it really is. Not a title. Not a brand. Not a spotlight. But something quieter. Something more ancient. A presence I didn't invent. A rhythm I didn't create but could finally hear.

And I believe this rhythm is **not just something we remember**. It's something **we carry forward**.

This is not a closing chapter. It's a new beginning.

A quiet revolution of spirit-led leadership.

Rooted. Listening. Ready.

Because *leadership is not a performance*. It's a **presence**.

Let your leadership be a return.

To the stillness you forgot.

To the rhythm that shaped you.

To the soul of who you are—and why you're here.

Because when leaders begin to follow their soul,
the world just might begin to follow its own.