

DISCOVER WHO YOU ARE

The single most important step in
your leadership journey

By Ben Ponne, NEO



neo[®]

THE ADVENTURE
OF DISCOVERING THE
LEADER WITHIN

Copyright © NEO Leaders Ltd 2015
All rights reserved.

BACKGROUND

If you want to succeed as a leader, it is extremely important to have a clear purpose and meaning in life. Without purpose, you are likely to drift away on the waves of your social, cultural, and economic environment. You drift away from your true self into a position where you don't really want to be, like a stranded ship on a shallow sand-bank. Far away from your intended course and unable to move, you are completely dependent on what the environment throws towards you. Having lost valuable time, and with limited space to manoeuvre, it may be time to call in the rescue boats.

*"If you don't change direction
you may end up where you are
heading."*

- Lao Tzu

Having clarity of purpose and meaning means that you will be able to focus all your attention on what is important to you. You will not waste time and energy on activities that don't align with who you are and what you stand for. But where do you start if you haven't yet discovered your purpose or mission in life? Where do you look for answers?

This report helps you to answer this question. It provides a three-step approach to help you understand who you are.

OUR APPROACH AND PREMISES

NEO's leadership development approach is grounded in a set of core premises that originate from the best personal leadership practices of East and West.

1. Leadership is a lifelong journey of self-actualisation
2. Leadership comes from within
3. We are shaped by our past
4. What we perceive is not reality

NEO PREMISE 1: LEADERSHIP IS A LIFELONG JOURNEY OF SELF-ACTUALISATION

For thousands of years, discovering clarity of purpose has been a recurring theme in Eastern and Western philosophies, religions, and psychology. The earliest Taoist texts (dating from the sixth century BC) describe ways of self-cultivation in order to return to a mode of existence that is natural and not obscured by social conditioning. The great Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi, who lived during the Chinese Song Dynasty (between 1130 and 1200), taught that through self-cultivation, one's conduct could be brought into harmony with the principles of the human being.

In his book *The Tao of Balance*, he describes: Those who possess sincerity or pure mind achieve the right way without effort, understand without thinking, and can naturally and easily embody the Way (Dao/Tao). Tao in this context means 'big road' or 'ultimate road', what you are destined to achieve in life, your core purpose. Finding harmony between core purpose and men is a central theme in the Confucian Way. It is a life-long journey of self-cultivation, of striving for perfection, all the while knowing that you will never quite achieve it.

In the West, the humanistic approach embodies similar thinking. In particular the humanistic psychologist, Carl Rogers, believed that humans have one basic motive, which is the tendency to self-actualise and fulfil one's potential. He writes: "This ideal human condition is embodied in the 'fully functioning person', who is open to experience, able to live existentially, is trusting in his/her own organism, expresses feelings freely, acts independently, is creative and lives a richer life; *the good life*." The good life is a *process*, not a state of being. It is a journey, not a destination.

*"Mastering others is strength;
mastering yourself is true power."*

- Lao Tzu

NEO PREMISE 2: LEADERSHIP COMES FROM WITHIN

Thousands of studies have been conducted over the last hundred years to determine the key personality traits, behaviours, styles, activities, and other characteristics of great leaders. None of these studies have provided a definitive answer on what it takes to become a great leader. There are some personal characteristics that are evident amongst the population of great leaders, but trying to mimic these would not necessarily change your underlying personality. It would merely be a forced, unauthentic performance and people would see through it immediately.

In 2007, Bill George, Peter Sims, Andrew McLean, and Diana Mayer published an article in the Harvard Business Review entitled *Discovering Your Authentic Leadership*. After analysing 3,000 pages of transcripts, their team was startled to find that you do not have to be born with specific characteristics or traits of a leader. They concluded that leadership emerges from your life story; it comes from within.

Leadership is an expression of who you really are, an expression of your purpose, goals, values, principles, beliefs, motivations, behaviours, emotions, knowledge, and fears. It involves a blend of various disciplines such as psychology, physiology, and philosophy. Although leadership involves relationships with individuals and groups, your source of effective leadership is always an expression of who you really are. That's where it all starts.

NEO PREMISE 3: WE ARE SHAPED BY OUR PAST

From the average age of 18 months you start to develop self-awareness. In other words, you start to recognise yourself in the mirror. By 24 months you will become aware of how you relate to other people and your environment. At the same time you will start to become aware of your emotions. Emotions are strong feelings, such as anger, hate, love, fear, confusion, shame, and joy. Emotion is universal. Everybody feels in the same language; it transcends culture, social classes, ages, and political boundaries. In fact, the only thing you really know about yourself are your emotions. Studies have shown that emotions provide strong anchors for your memory. This means that you will remember emotional events better than non-emotional events.

“Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

- Mark Twain

Evolution has given us automatic emotional responses, which are parts of our genetic makeup. When a lion unexpectedly jumps in front of you, fear will immediately kick in. Your heart rate will increase, your blood pressure will go up, your muscles will tighten, your breathing will become shallow, and your pupils will become larger. Your physical body is getting ready for a “fight or flight” response.

Other emotional responses will be “learned” responses gleaned from your social and cultural development. They are a representation of the meaning you attribute to sensations from within your body and from your environment. This is where physiology, psychology, and philosophy work hand in hand. In addition to automatic emotional responses, these learned responses can also become automatic or habitual.

Everything you do and experience in the present will be added to your past. A good understanding of your past is therefore essential to understanding who you are.

NEO PREMISE 4: WHAT WE PERCEIVE IS NOT REALITY

There is a lot to take in when you grow up. Memories, emotions, and internal thinking processes help you to build a story of your life. You will create a perception of what has happened with you in the past. This perception is your personal reality: the way you see yourself, your relationship with others, and your environment.

BELIEFS AND VALUES

Beliefs are what you perceive to be true. Beliefs are not the same as reality, it’s what you believe is reality. People develop different sets of beliefs and therefore everybody has a different perception of reality. Beliefs can come from such areas as personal experience, education, social or cultural influence. Many opinions and beliefs are communicated and exchanged in your daily life. You only have to think about the pervasiveness of marketing in media and social networks. Marketing tries to influence your underlying beliefs and how you think, feel, reason, and select (a certain product or service).

Beliefs are extremely powerful and an important feed into people’s attitude and behaviour. A good illustration of the power of belief is when people are put under hypnosis. Under hypnosis, people can be instructed to see things that are not there. For example, they may be instructed to believe that an onion is a juicy apple. When they wake up, they are completely unaware that their beliefs have been changed. When they are given an onion, they behave exactly as if they were eating a juicy apple. They are completely unaware of the difference and wonder why the audience is laughing.

You may be able to identify many of your core beliefs, but you will also have beliefs that you are unaware of. They are settled in your unconsciousness but can have a significant impact on your day-to-day life. They may not be as extreme as the onion story above, but they can severely limit progress in your leadership journey.

"Under all that we think lives all we believe, like the ultimate veil of our spirits."

- Antonio Machado

Brain activity scans have shown that when people receive information that contradicts their current beliefs (an experience known as *cognitive dissonance*), the emotional centres of the brain are activated. This does not happen when people are presented with information that supports their current beliefs. Once people arrive at a conclusion that makes them emotionally comfortable, the reward and pleasure centres of the brain show increased activity, which reinforces their original beliefs. This phenomenon is called the *confirmation bias*.

This means that beliefs tend to be self-sustaining and over time, they solidify. More stable, fundamental beliefs slowly turn into *values*. They are the things that you believe are most important in the way you live your life.

Now that you have a foundational knowledge of these four core premises, you can begin to take some practical steps on your leadership journey by using the exercises below.

STEP 1: EXPLORE YOUR PAST

The following exercise will help you to explore and discover key components of your past that will help you to gain clarity.

EXERCISE STEP 1

Purpose: To explore and discover the events in your past that define who you are today.

Create a timeline representing your life from your birth till now. On this timeline, mark the most significant life changing events. For each event, capture the following information:

EVENT

Briefly describe the event. What happened?

WHEN

When did it happen?

EMOTION

What was your emotional response? What did you feel?

VALUE

What was important for you in life at that point in time?

MEANING

What did this mean to you? What were your thoughts?

NOTES

How did this relate to your environment? What was the context?

Here are some illustrative examples to help you on your way:

EXAMPLE 1:

Event: My nephew passed away. He was hit by a car when he crossed the road. He was just seven.

When: June 1980

Emotion: Sad, confused, devastated, shocked, helpless, abandoned, lost

Value: Friendship, safety in traffic

Meaning: Friendship can hurt. Traffic is dangerous. Dead is sad and scary.

Notes: I always played with my nephew. We were about the same age. We were very close.

EXAMPLE 2:

Event: I graduated from university

When: August 1997

Emotion: Proud, happy, spirited, inspired, optimistic, relieved, fulfilled

Value: Educational achievement, advancement

Meaning: My parents are proud of me. I will have a bright future. I will have many opportunities.

Notes: Parents attended my graduation despite running a business and being very busy.

EXAMPLE 3

Event: I prepared for a major competition in gymnastics. I lost and I noticed my dad at the sideline. He shook his head and looked very disappointed.

When: January 2005

Emotion: Embarrassed, sad, disappointed, worthless, defeated, inferior

Value: Being loved by my parents

Meaning: I disappointed my dad. He thinks I am a failure. I am not good in this sport.

Notes: My dad was everything. He was my hero. He was my role model. He didn't tell me he was disappointed but his body language was clear.

*"Study the past, if you would
divine the future."*

- Confucius

Some questions to ask yourself are:

- What were the defining moments or periods in your life?
- When were you most alive?
- When were you completely absorbed in activities and forgot about time and yourself?
- When was the first time you ...? First-time experiences are often very vivid, such as your first day at school or university, first love, birth of your first child, first victory, first date, the first time you were dumped by a lover, first major accident, first kiss, first speech, first public humiliation, first swimming lesson, first funeral, or first time in hospital.
- What triggered major changes in your environment, such as leaving home, a change of job, or even more extreme changes, such as adoption or emigration?

Not everybody is comfortable expressing emotions and some of you may struggle to identify emotions accurately. Some people are more self-aware than others. Friends and family are often valuable sources for input, especially for events that happened in your early childhood.

The English language has hundreds of different words for emotions. If you have difficulty putting your emotions into words, then the following list may help. These are some commonly used emotional categories. Please note that this is not a clear-cut categorisation. Some words may fit in more than one category. For example if you feel “exhausted”, it may be a positive feeling after a major workout, but it may not be as positive if your children have kept you awake during the night. Intensity of emotions may also move you across categories. For example “disgust” can easily escalate into fear or anger.

EMOTIONS

LOVE

Accepting, Admiring, Adoring, Affectionate, Altruistic, Appreciative, Attached, Attracted, Captivated, Caring, Compassionate, Considerate, Enchanted, Empathetic, Forgiving, Friendly, Generous, Grateful, Helpful, Kind, Passionate, Proud, Romantic, Sensual, Sharing, Sociable, Sympathetic, Thankful, Thoughtful, Tolerant, Understanding, Warm.

ANGER

Angry, Annoyed, Bitter, Cheated, Cranky, Disgruntled, Displeased, Enraged, Flustered, Frustrated, Fuming, Furious, Grouchy, Grumpy, Infuriated, Insulted, Irritated, Outraged, Rebellious, Resentful, Revolted, Sour, Upset, Violent, Wronged.

FEAR

Agitated, Anxious, Apprehensive, Cautious, Cold feet, Concerned, Defensive, Discouraged, Distressed, Distrustful, Doubting, Dreading, Evasive, Fearful, Frightened, Guarded, Horrified, Inhibited, Insecure, Intimidated, Jittery, Mortified, Nervous, Panicky, Paranoid, Petrified, Restless, Restrained, Scared, Shocked, Shy, Skittish, Spooked, Stressed, Suspicious, Tense, Terrified, Threatened, Torn, Trapped, Trembling, Troubled, Uneasy, Worried.

SADNESS

Abandoned, Abused, Afflicted, Agonising, Alienated, Blue, Bullied, Crushed, Defeated, Dejected, Demoralised, Depressed, Despairing, Devastated, Disappointed, Disconnected, Discouraged, Disillusioned, Dissatisfied, Distressed, Empty, Exhausted, Grieving, Gloomy, Heart-broken, Helpless, Hurt, Homesick, Hopeless, Low, Melancholy, Miserable, Mourning, Overwhelmed, Pessimistic, Powerless, Somber, Suffering, Regretful, Sad, Suicidal, Tormented, Troubled, Unhappy, Unloved, Vulnerable.

HAPPINESS

Alive, Animated, Blissful, Buoyant, Cheerful, Content, Delirious, Delighted, Ecstatic, Enchanted, Energetic, Enthusiastic, Euphoric, Excited, Exuberant, Exhilarated, Glad, Gratified, Happy, Hilarious, Hysterical, Inspired, Jovial, Joyous, Jubilant, Lighthearted, Lively, Optimistic, Passionate, Peaceful, Pleased, Radiant, Satisfied, Spirited, Stimulated, Talkative, Thrilled, Triumphant, Uplifted.

DISGUST

Abhorrence, Abomination, Antipathy, Detestation, Dislike, Distaste, Hate, Objection, Revulsion.

EMBARRASSMENT

Accused, Ashamed, Awkward, Degraded, Disgraced, Dishonoured, Embarrassed, Foolish, Guilty, Humiliated, Inferior, Remorseful, Shame, Submissive, Uncomfortable, Worthless.

CURIOSITY

Absorbed, Creative, Curious, Fascinated, Impressed, Inspired, Involved, Inquiring, Inquisitive, Interested, Intrigued, Obsessed, Questioning, Skeptical, Wondering.

SURPRISE

Amazed, Astonished, Astounded, Breathless, Flabbergasted, Overwhelmed, Speechless, Startled, Stunned, Surprised.

After this step you will have gathered essential information to describe who you are.

STEP 2: DISCOVER YOUR VALUES AND BELIEFS

EXERCISE STEP 2

Purpose: To explore, discover, and prioritise your core values.

Notes: As part of Step 1, you captured information on the most significant and life defining events in your past. You also captured the values and meanings associated with these events. Go through these again and see if you can find values that have been consistent. They will be strong candidates for your set of core values.

Go through the list of values on the next page and select the values that you believe are important to you today. It is impossible to provide a complete list of everything that could be a value. So add your own values if they are not in the list. Be honest with yourself; you don't do this exercise for somebody else, so try to avoid values that are not part of the real you. It might be tempting to add values that are socially or culturally desirable, or values that have been imposed on you by your organisation. That's not what this activity is about. It is all about you.

- Identify your top 30 values and write them down.
- Cluster the values that are similar in nature. For example, Abundance, Affluence and Wealth may all have the same meaning to you.
- Prioritise your top 10 values. The easiest way to this is to rate each value from 1 to 5, where "1" is very important to you and "5" is a "nice to have".

Once you have identified your top values, add a description. Describe what these values mean to you personally. For example, if you value "Health" then that can mean different things to different people, e.g. physical fitness, healthy food, weight loss, or regular checkups at your health clinic.

Once you are finished with this step, you will have a list of your core values, each with a clear description of what they mean to you. Your core values will be a guiding force in your decision making. Even if you don't know exactly what your future will be, you know that these decisions will make you feel happy, fulfilled and satisfied. They are your guiding principles. Great leaders know exactly what their core values are and demonstrate these with ease and comfort in every action they take.

LIST OF VALUES

Abundance	Courtesy	Grace	Order	Sincerity
Acceptance	Creativity	Gratitude	Originality	Social Contact
Accountability	Credibility	Growth	Outdoors	Soundness
Accuracy	Curiosity	Happiness	Patriotism	Speed
Achievement	Decisiveness	Hard Work	Peace	Spirituality
Acknowledgement	Dependability	Harmony	Perfection	Spontaneity
Advancement	Determination	Health	Performance	Stability
Adventure	Devoutness	Helpfulness	Physical Activity	Strategic
Aesthetics	Diligence	Holiness	Piety	Status
Affiliation	Discipline	Honesty	Pleasure	Strength
Affluence	Discretion	Honor	Politeness	Structure
Agility	Diversity	Humility	Positivity	Success
Altruism	Dynamism	Humor	Power	Supervision
Ambition	Economy	Idealism	Practicality	Support
Amusement	Education	Imagination	Preparedness	Teamwork
Art	Effectiveness	Improvement	Privacy	Temperance
Assertiveness	Efficiency	Independence	Professionalism	Thankfulness
Authority	Elegance	Individuality	Prosperity	Thoroughness
Balance	Empathy	Influence	Prudence	Thoughtfulness
Beauty	Enjoyment	Ingenuity	Quality Oriented	Timeliness
Being the best	Entertainment	Inner Harmony	Recognition	Tolerance
Belonging	Enthusiasm	Innovation	Relationships	Tradition
Boldness	Environment	Insight	Reliability	Tranquility
Bravery	Equality	Inspiration	Resourcefulness	Travel
Calmness	Ethics	Integrity	Respect	Trustworthiness
Capability	Excellence	Intelligence	Restraint	Truth Seeking
Care	Excitement	Intellectual Status	Results Oriented	Understanding
Challenge	Expertise	Intimacy	Righteousness	Uniqueness
Charity	Exploration	Intuition	Rigor	Unity
Cheerfulness	Expressiveness	Joy	Religion	Usefulness
Cleanliness	Fairness	Justice	Reputation	Variety
Commitment	Faith	Knowledge	Romance	Vengeance
Community	Family	Leadership	Routine	Virtue
Compassion	Fast Paced	Legacy	Security	Vision
Competence	Fidelity	Location	Self-actualisation	Vitality
Competition	Fitness	Love	Self-control	Wealth
Confidence	Fluency	Loyalty	Selflessness	Winning
Consistency	Focus	Making a Difference	Self-reliance	Wisdom
Contentment	Forgiveness	Mastery	Sensitivity	
Contribution	Freedom	Merit	Serenity	
Control	Friendship	Moral Fulfillment	Service	
Cooperation	Fun	Obedience	Sexuality	
Correctness	Generosity	Open-mindedness	Shrewdness	
Courage	Goodness	Openness	Simplicity	

STEP 3: DESCRIBE WHO YOU ARE

In this step, you will formulate a first draft of your core purpose based on the information you captured in Steps 1 and 2. Your core purpose, which describes who you are, consists of two components:

1. A short purpose statement (Why do you exist? Why are you here?)
2. Your values and beliefs (your guiding principles)

This may still seem a little abstract so let's start with an example. Walt Disney instilled his purpose and beliefs into a company with the same name.

Walt Disney's purpose statement: "To make people happy".

Walt Disney's values (1955):

- No cynicism allowed
- Fanatical attention to consistency and detail
- Continuous progress via creativity, dreams, and imagination
- Fanatical control and preservation of Disney's "magic" image
- "To bring happiness to millions" and to celebrate, nurture, and promulgate "wholesome American values".

Your purpose should be very clear and succinct and is not likely to change over time. It describes why you are here. Values and beliefs provide principles that guide us within the context of the core purpose. Walt Disney went into media networks, parks and resorts, consumer products, studios, and interactive media. All for one purpose: "To make people happy".

Nelson Mandela's purpose was justice and freedom for every individual. His speech at the Rivonia Trial in 1964 before his imprisonment illustrates his commitment to his core values: "I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

After 22 years in prison, under very harsh circumstances, he refused an offer from the then State President of South Africa, P.W. Botha, to be released. The reason was that Botha's offer was conditional and violated Mandela's core values and beliefs. It required Mandela to abandon everything he had stood for and retire in silence. As a result, he spent another five years in prison before he walked out in 1990. This event was broadcasted all over the world and signified the start of a legendary chapter in the pursuit of justice and equality in South Africa.

In the following exercise, write down your core purpose, or what you "believe" is your core purpose. At this stage, it will be a rough draft based on what you have discovered from your past and how this accumulated into who you are today. You may not be able to come up with a very succinct purpose yet, and that's fine. You will refine your purpose as you progress in your leadership journey.

"The superior leader gets things done with very little motion. He imparts instruction not through many words but through a few deeds. He keeps informed about everything but interferes hardly at all. He is a catalyst, and though things would not get done well if he weren't there, when they succeed he takes no credit. And because he takes no credit, credit never leaves him."

- Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching

EXERCISE STEP 3

Purpose: To identify your core purpose and list your values and beliefs.

YOUR CORE PURPOSE (WHY YOU ARE HERE)

Go over the results of Step 1 and try to identify the major themes throughout your life. Write down what inspired and energised you. Keep asking yourself WHY? WHY you are here? WHY do you do what you do? WHY do you make certain decisions over and over again? WHY are you doing these exercises?

YOUR CORE VALUES AND BELIEFS (WHAT GUIDES YOU)

List the values you discovered in Step 2 and go through them again. Think about decisions you made recently and assess whether these decisions were fuelled by your core values. Change your core values, or the description of your core values, to reflect the motivation for these decisions.

“The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.”

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky

It may seem ironic that the first steps you take along the path to becoming a great leader of others must begin with a journey into your own self. But as incongruous as it may seem, this is exactly what you need to do. Great leadership begins with knowing your core purpose and values, and with understanding how your past experiences and current beliefs have shaped you into your authentic self. When you delve into and become aware of your unique perceptions and values, and cultivate the ability to act from a place of authenticity, you will lead with ease and become a catalyst for success to all those around you.