



Tecnológico  
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W H I T E   P A P E R

# The Journey to Conscious Leadership

*Know, Align, and Transcend*

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## Executive Summary

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What does it take to become a conscious leader—one who leads with self-awareness, integrity, and a commitment to creating positive impact through business? To answer this question, we conducted in-depth interviews with 31 conscious leaders from around the world: CEOs of multinational corporations, senior executives, and founders of social enterprises, all widely recognized for using business as a force for good.

From their stories, we identified a developmental model built around three interrelated pathways: **Know, Align, and Transcend**. The journey begins with knowing—developing deep self-awareness and empathy through honest self-reflection, mindfulness, and inner work. Many of the leaders we interviewed described investing years in therapy, meditation, and personal development to understand their own values, emotions, and motivations, which in turn sharpened their ability to understand others.

The second pathway is alignment—harmonizing one’s beliefs, words, and actions to achieve integrity and authenticity. Conscious leaders ensure that their personal values are reflected not only in their own behavior but in their organization’s culture, policies, and practices. This consistency builds trust and creates a powerful sense of wholeness that inspires others.

The third pathway, transcendence, is where personal growth meets societal impact. Here, leaders move beyond ego-driven motivations to embrace a higher purpose. Remarkably, we found that transcendence is often linked to personal healing: many conscious leaders have experienced significant hardships—childhood trauma, family crises, or profound encounters with injustice—and have channeled that pain into creating positive change for others.

A central finding of our research is the role of **disequilibrating experiences**—life events that disrupt our sense of normalcy—in catalyzing the conscious leadership journey. What sets conscious leaders apart is not the absence of adversity but their response to it: they treat disruption as a catalyst for growth and transformation rather than something to be avoided.

We also explore the critical roles of **emotional intelligence (EQ)** and **spiritual intelligence (SQ)** in conscious leadership development. EQ enables leaders to regulate their emotions and deeply understand others, while SQ provides the sense of meaning, purpose, and connectedness that distinguishes conscious leaders from those driven primarily by financial metrics.

The pathway to conscious leadership is neither quick nor easy. It demands courage, commitment, and a willingness to confront difficult truths. But the rewards—for leaders, their organizations, and the world—are profound. By understanding the processes that shape conscious leaders, organizations can cultivate more of them, building businesses that are not

only more successful but also more human, purposeful, and equipped to address our world's greatest challenges.

## Introduction

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When interviewing exceptional leaders known for their impact and kindness, we came across the story of a managing director of a large technology company. He was a former meditation teacher who joined that company as a salesperson, climbing up to the top leadership role. Upon arriving in this position, he never forgot his life lessons, especially from growing up with an abusive father and domestic violence. When his daughter asked him to join her on a volunteer trip to Cambodia, he witnessed the horrors of child sex trafficking and volunteered in survivors' shelters. He managed to get to **know** himself in the process and decided to **align** the company's impact with human rights. By making profound connections to his childhood and life story, he **transcended** the trauma and healed. His company gained a reputation for its activism and impactful work, and employee engagement went through the roof. As he told us:

*“I don't think it is possible for a reasonable human being to meet a 3-year-old former sex slave who had been raped multiple times a day for a long period and not decide that you want to do something about it. [...] I met children who had been freed from slavery, and I couldn't ignore the injustice. That moment shifted my entire perspective on business. I knew I had to do something, and I committed to using my company as a platform to fight for human rights.”*

In today's complex and challenging business environment, there is a growing need for a new kind of leader—one who can harness the power of business to solve societal challenges while also creating economic value.

Enter the conscious leader: an individual who operates from high levels of self-awareness, leads with authenticity and integrity, and is driven by a higher purpose to create lasting positive impact through their work.

Conscious leadership, as introduced by the Conscious Capitalism movement, redefines the purpose of business. It integrates business success with a responsibility to create value for all stakeholders: customers, employees, shareholders, suppliers, society, and the environment. This perspective goes beyond the narrow view of corporate philanthropy, requiring leaders to embed purpose into the core business strategy.

Rooted in self-awareness, emotional intelligence (EQ), and spiritual intelligence (SQ), conscious leaders aim to connect personal growth with positive impact.

But how can you develop into this type of leader? What experiences and processes shape conscious leaders? And how can organizations cultivate more of them?

To answer these questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with 31 conscious leaders from around the world—CEOs and senior executives of multinational corporations as well as founders of social enterprises. These individuals are widely recognized for using business as a force for good and inspiring others to follow their path. Here is what we learned.

## Three Key Pathways to Conscious Leadership

The Conscious Leader Development Model details the three interrelated pathways toward a different kind of leader: Know, Align, and Transcend.

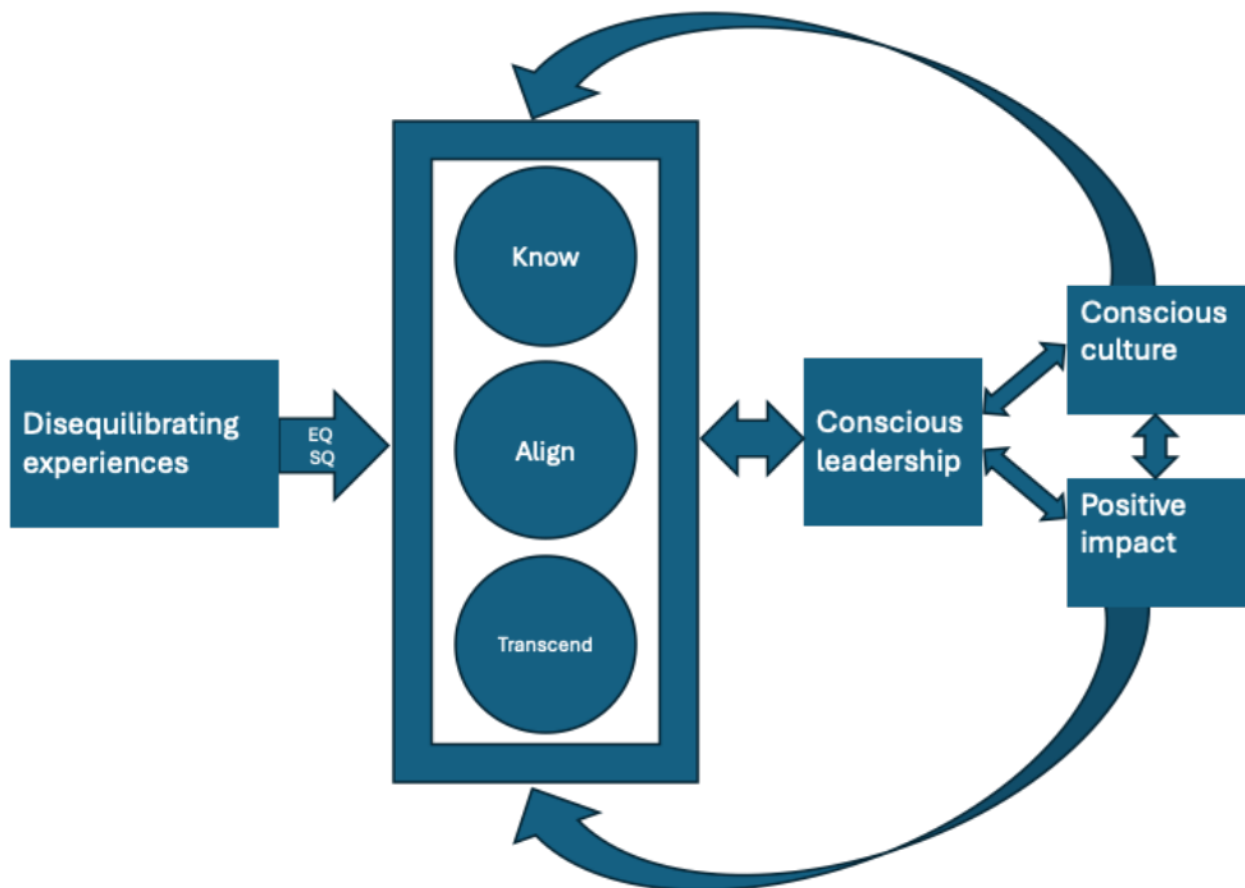


Figure 1: The Conscious Leader Development Model



## 1. Know: Build Self-Awareness and Empathy

To start the journey toward conscious leadership you must **know**: develop a deep awareness—of yourself, others, and the interconnected systems within which we operate. Self-awareness involves understanding your thoughts, emotions, values, strengths, and limitations. It requires honest self-reflection and a willingness to explore your inner world.

Many conscious leaders we interviewed described investing significant time and effort in therapy, mindfulness, and meditation to enhance self-awareness. One CEO of a large German company shared the strong impact his country’s history had on him and how he chose to invest time in self-development to cope with the pain of the past and create a better future:

*“I realized that I was very conditioned by the generation that was responsible for the Holocaust. They were all around me because Germany was involved in that. If I wanted to be a different person, I needed to work on this conditioning. So, I started early in my teenage years to read many books around this, and then, in my early 20s, I started to do systematic spiritual and psychological work. I invested many decades of my life in intense inner work.”*

Self-awareness is also the foundation of empathy. When leaders are deeply aware of their emotional states, they become more adept at understanding the emotional experiences of others. This creates stronger relationships within teams, allowing leaders to build environments of psychological safety and interconnectedness where innovation and collaboration thrive.

Research shows that leaders who demonstrate empathy foster higher employee engagement, retention, and overall well-being:

*“Every single day when I go to work, I would see a homeless person on the way. I would see someone who should have a standard of living that they don’t have.”*

Self-awareness enables you as a conscious leader to:

- Clarify your core values and beliefs
- Regulate your emotions and behaviors more effectively
- Understand the needs and motivations of yourself, the company, and the stakeholders
- See challenges from multiple perspectives
- Have clarity about your higher purpose in life and work

## 2. Align: Harmonize Beliefs, Words and Actions

The second core process of conscious leadership involves **aligning** your inner and outer worlds—harmonizing beliefs, words, and actions to achieve a state of integrity and authenticity.

A critical aspect of alignment is integrity—staying true to your values, especially when doing so is difficult. Leaders who align their actions with their beliefs build trust with stakeholders, as their behavior consistently reflects their stated intentions. This kind of integrity is crucial in today’s business environment, where transparency and accountability are demanded by consumers, employees, and investors alike.

Alignment also extends beyond individual behavior to organizational culture. Conscious leaders must ensure that their personal values are reflected in their company’s values, policies, and practices. One CEO shared his experience of resigning from a high-paying role because he felt his work no longer aligned with his values:

*“I realized that my personal values were in conflict with the company’s priorities. I had to make a choice: continue down a path that felt wrong or take a leap toward something more aligned with my sense of purpose. That decision ultimately led me to start my own purpose-driven business.”*

A woman who founded a social enterprise in Brazil to financially and socially empower local women emotionally expressed the sensation of aligning her work and her company to her intrinsic motivation and purpose in life:

*“It’s in my body, it’s in my soul. I cannot imagine myself doing anything other than what we are doing. That’s right, that’s right! It’s my soul. I had to do it. People spend their whole lives trying to find their purpose. When you find it, everything flows.”*

This alignment creates a sense of wholeness, integrity, and “being at home in oneself” that radiates authenticity and inspires trust in others. It is built on the sense that we are worthy of acceptance and that being vulnerable at work can be a positive aspect of leadership.

The Align process allows you as a conscious leader to:

- Make decisions aligned with your values
- Communicate and connect authentically
- Ensure consistency between your thoughts, words, and actions (walk the talk)
- Integrate different aspects of your identity and roles for authenticity and integrity
- Align your work with intrinsic motivations and a sense of purpose
- Create trust and genuine connection with others

### 3. Transcend: Heal Through Positive Impact

The third stage in the conscious leadership journey is **transcendence**, where personal growth meets societal impact. This stage involves moving beyond ego-driven motivations to embrace a higher purpose, fostering a positive influence in the world. Conscious leaders inspire others to pursue this shared purpose, helping them find personal meaning in their work. Such positive impact instills a sense of significance in both life and work, providing leaders and their teams with a feeling of mattering. Recognizing that one’s work makes a difference is among the most powerful sources of meaning and happiness.

We found that this process of transcendence is intimately linked with **personal healing for many conscious leaders**. Transcendence reflects the leader’s capacity to heal from personal suffering by positively impacting others. Many conscious leaders have experienced significant personal hardships, such as childhood trauma or family crises, which have shaped their worldview. Rather than being hindered by these experiences, conscious leaders use them as fuel for creating change to prevent other people’s similar suffering.

One founder of an American construction company realized that he no longer desired to be a transactional leader who used people as a means to his own success. This change occurred after he reflected on his childhood with an abusive father. He decided to align his values and intrinsic motivation with his work, leading him to create a new business aimed at eliminating harmful managerial practices in the sector:

*“We treat people as objects for our success. A leader who treats somebody that way is not a leader; he is a tyrant [...] It is a more robust mission that we are on to eliminate that. [...] I know how good it feels when you are kind or you’re creating that environment. I want to perpetuate that through everybody who works here and hopefully give them the same feeling.”*

Another leader who witnessed domestic violence as a child became a fierce advocate for human rights and equality. This work led to healing—for the leader and others:

*“In those very early formative years, I saw the best and the worst of humanity. My father taught me how not to treat people, how not to abuse power, and how there can be such a strong gender imbalance that can lead to bad and destructive behaviors. One of the things I hate is inequality. I think we are all equal as human beings. I hate power being abused and usurping the rights of others.”*

It’s critical to view challenges as opportunities for growth and healing. This mindset allows leaders to approach crises with a sense of purpose, using adversity as a catalyst for innovation and positive impact. Moreover, organizations that prioritize transcendence—by embedding purpose into their DNA—are better positioned to attract talent, foster loyalty, and maintain resilience in turbulent times.

Therefore, the Transcend process allows you as a conscious leader to:

- Lead with a vital purpose that makes work and life more meaningful
- Enable others to live by a higher purpose
- Connect to something larger than yourself
- Use your unique gifts in service of others
- Transform pain and struggle into positive action
- Take a long-term, systemic, and holistic approach to business as a force for good

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# The Power of Disequilibrating Experiences in Leaders' Growth

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How can conscious leaders undergo the three processes of Know, Align, and Transcend? Certainly not by avoiding adversity. A central finding in our research is the role of **disequilibrating experiences**—life events that disrupt our sense of normalcy or stability—in catalyzing the conscious leadership journey. These moments of disruption push leaders out of their comfort zones and force them to confront fundamental questions about their values, purpose, and impact.

While most people experience adversity at some point in their lives, it is the way that conscious leaders respond to these challenges that sets them apart. Instead of being overwhelmed by adversity or trying to avoid and escape the pain, such leaders view it as an opportunity for personal growth and transformation. By embracing these moments of disequilibrium, leaders gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world, which helps them become more empathetic, resilient, and purpose-driven.

A prominent CEO shared how his daughter's illness became a pivotal moment in his leadership journey. Learning from adversity enabled this leader to experience post-traumatic growth and become a more empathetic leader:

*“When my daughter was diagnosed with cancer, everything I thought was important suddenly felt meaningless. That crisis forced me to rethink how I was living and leading. It wasn't about business success anymore; it was about finding a deeper purpose in my work and using my influence to create something meaningful.”*

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## The Role of EQ and SQ in Conscious Leadership

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Another important catalyst for developing conscious leadership through the Know, Align, and Transcend stages is cultivating high levels of **emotional intelligence (EQ)** and **spiritual intelligence (SQ)**. These two forms of intelligence are foundational to the conscious leader's ability to connect personal growth with societal impact, ensuring their leadership remains aligned with their higher purpose and the world's needs.

Leaders with high EQ are skilled at regulating their emotions, allowing them to respond calmly and thoughtfully to stressful situations. This emotional regulation prevents reactive decision-making and fosters more measured, intentional leadership. Additionally, EQ enables leaders to

understand the emotional states of their team members, which is particularly important for managing diverse teams, resolving conflicts, and creating a culture of inclusion and belonging.

While less widely discussed than EQ in the business context, SQ is equally important in the conscious leadership model. It refers to the capacity to find meaning and purpose in life and to lead with a strong sense of connectedness to humanity, nature, and the world. SQ helps leaders work from a place of deep purpose and authenticity, seeing their work as part of a broader mission to contribute to the well-being of others and society. It imparts meaning to experiences, providing self-transcendence purpose in your personal and professional lives.

SQ is about cultivating a sense of inner wisdom and higher purpose that guides decision-making and action. Leaders with high SQ are not motivated solely by external rewards like profit or status. Instead, they are driven by a desire to make a meaningful impact in the world by promoting social justice, environmental sustainability, or the well-being of their employees and communities. This spiritual dimension of leadership is what differentiates conscious leaders from conventional leaders focused only on financial metrics.

Research has shown that leaders who cultivate SQ are more resilient, adaptable, and able to lead through uncertainty. Because they are grounded in a sense of purpose, they are less likely to be swayed by short-term pressures or external validation. This allows them to maintain their integrity and stay aligned with their values, even in the face of adversity.

## Reflection Questions for Leaders

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The pathway toward conscious leadership begins with deep reflection and courageous questions. Here are several that can help you embark on this journey and awaken new possibilities:

- 1.** What do I believe I know about myself, the organization, and the world? Am I sure these assumptions are correct? How can I know myself better and deepen my understanding of the world? What can I do to help our employees achieve the same? Can we create a culture that encourages authenticity, vulnerability, and awareness?
- 2.** What are my core values? How can I better align my values and my actions? How do we create meaningful and acted-upon corporate values and align them with our purpose and impact?
- 3.** How do I transcend my ego and power drive to do something meaningful for myself and others? How do I create an organizational higher purpose that transcends profits and

products to create a long-lasting positive impact on society? How can I enable everyone in the organization to find their purpose and work to achieve it?

## The Future of Leadership is Conscious

As our world faces increasingly complex challenges, from climate change to rising inequality, we urgently need a new kind of leader who can harness the power of business to create shared prosperity and solve societal problems. Leaders who **know** themselves and others, **align** their actions with their values and a higher purpose, and **transcend** challenges and experiences to create positive societal impact will be the ones who guide their organizations—and the world—through the complexities of the 21st century.

The journey to conscious leadership is not an easy one. It requires courage, commitment, and a willingness to look deeply at yourself and grapple with brutal truths. By understanding the processes that shape these leaders, we can cultivate more of them—in our organizations and society. For those who undertake it, the rewards are profound.

*By fostering more conscious leaders, we can create organizations that are not only more successful but also more human, purposeful, and equipped to tackle our world's greatest challenges. The future of business—and our planet—may depend on it.*