

# MAKING LEADERSHIP ART: A HUMANISTIC REGARD ON LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT

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**This essay aims to humanize leadership by representing it as art. It argues that treating leadership as art allows us to cultivate a humanistic regard—that is, a concern for the ways the study, teaching, and practice of leadership help people grow, move closer, and cultivate communities. A humanistic regard invites scholars, educators, and anyone who aspires to lead to move beyond idealism, individualism, and instrumentality, and to focus on the existential, social, and moral features of our productions and performances. Once we regard leadership as art, we can make better art. It becomes possible to ask whether and how leadership moves us and others: Is it impulsive or intentional? Is it imposing or inviting? In what way does it change our world for the better? In keeping with those questions, the essay contends that leadership development entails three movements: Clarifying and committing to a personal intent, inviting others to share that intent and help leaders bring it to life, and intervening in the current culture. Finally, the essay articulates how a humanistic regard for leadership as art integrates various streams of recent research, and opens a path toward more meaningful scholarship, more significant pedagogy, and more responsible practice.**

In the Spring of 1917, French American artist Marcel Duchamp purchased a standard urinal at a New York City hardware store, installed it on a wooden pedestal, inscribed it with a fictional artist's signature, and submitted it to the inaugural exhibition of the city's Society of Independent Artists. He named the piece *Fountain* and described it as a "readymade," an art form in which "everyday objects [are] raised to the dignity of a work of art by the artist's act of choice" (cited in Martin, 1999). The Society's jury rejected Duchamp's submission, and the controversy that ensued secured *Fountain*'s place in art history. Some of its 16 replicas are currently on display in the Tate Modern in London, the San Francisco

Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto, and the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. In 2000, one sold at auction for 2 million U.S. dollars. Four years later, a jury of 500 experts named *Fountain* the most influential piece of modern art, ahead of works by Picasso and Warhol (Jury, 2004). Duchamp's work ushered a new regard for what art was, what making art meant, and who was entitled to tell.

I do not know if *Fountain* inspired the late James March's famous quip that leadership is a "delicate combination of plumbing and poetry" (cited in Podolny, 2011: 505), but I contend that leadership and *Fountain* have much in common. They are works of art whose development is not just a matter of mastering requisite skills to craft a beautiful form. At times, as Duchamp showed, art involves few traditional skills, violates aesthetic canons, and courts controversy. So does leadership (just look around). Both art and leadership, however, do require a somewhat intentional performance—as Duchamp put it, an "act of choice"—in relation to a group of people and the culture of a place at a moment in time.

In this essay, my intent is to make leadership art and invite you to do the same. I will treat leadership as a readymade, raising this "everyday object" of academic study and public concern to the "dignity of a work of art." I will argue that when we bring leadership to life in research, teaching, and practice, we are

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I am so grateful to Hannes Leroy. This essay would not exist without his invitation and insistence; patience and prompts; and caring, incisive editing. I am also grateful to Moran Anisman-Razin and two anonymous reviewers for their encouragement and insightful comments. Declan Fitzsimons, Peter Hope, Makoto Makabe, Wojtek Materka, Annie Peshkam, Louise Rönnerdahl, Elizabeth Sheprow, Mette Stuhr, Martin Vera, Svenja Weber, and Lopa Winters offered valuable feedback and decades of inspiration. The 2025 Systems Psychodynamic Gathering helped make this work more artful. I am most grateful to Pietro Petriglieri for showing me how art is made; to Arianna Petriglieri for reminding me why art moves; to Jennifer Petriglieri, my muse and maker; and to the Alps.

Accepted by Hannes Leroy

making leadership art. I will invite you to regard leadership—that is, the many conceptual articulations and personal incarnations of leadership—as works of art; and leadership development—that is, the production of leadership principles and the performance of leadership practices—as art work. I am mindful that others have extended a similar invitation before (e.g. Barnard, 1938; Depree, 1989; Vaill, 1989). Scholars have argued that leading should be a more artistic endeavor (Adler, 2006; Austin & Devin, 2003; Grint, 2000) and cast the artist as a useful analogy (Dégot, 2007; Mintzberg, 1998) and teacher (Dunham & Freeman, 2000; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009) for the leader. Extant works, however, are mostly aspirational. They argue that leaders should display more artistry, idealizing art as a practice of engaging with the implicit and the uncertain to produce the novel and inspiring. Here, I am not arguing that leadership must be more artful. I am arguing that it *is* art already, all of it. Like all other art, it takes many forms; it is not always novel, pleasing, or comprehensible; and it is never good for all.

Some may judge my invitation as incompatible with the project to strengthen the science of leadership and its development, a regressive pull to the days in which Barnard (1938: 235) cast leading as “a matter of art rather than science.” As I see it, nearly a century of research has embraced Barnard’s false dichotomy in the effort to refute his claim. In so doing, we might have earned academic legitimacy (Khurana, 2007) and gained a finer understanding of various facets of leadership. However, we have also generated a fragmented field, at times detached from the “real world” (Leroy, Rofcanin, Ogbonnaya, Benischke & Fainshmidt, 2025), and we have dehumanized leadership, often reducing it to an idealized, individual, and instrumental pursuit void of torment, sociality, and morality (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015).

In this essay, I refute Barnard’s (1938) dichotomy while embracing his claim. We need not stop doing leadership science to make leadership art. The opposite of art is not science. It is empire. Both art and science suffer in regimes that demand conformity and stifle freedoms of inquiry and expression. Making leadership art, I contend, may help us do better leadership science. It can help us integrate recent streams and heed scholarly calls to study, teach, and exercise leadership as “a dynamic, contextually embedded phenomenon shaped by interdependent forces” (Leroy et al., 2025: e1). A resolution to make leadership art releases us from emulating the natural sciences, and frees us up to build a humanistic social science—that

is, a science concerned with personal growth, social cohesion, and the systems that sustain (or hamper) both. A science invested in human development across levels, focused on investigating it and intervening to foster it; attuned to personal preferences and cultural context; grounded in philosophy and history; critical of the ideals that people pursue and concerned about the constraints they encounter (Selznick, 2008; see also Nussbaum, 2011).

Making leadership art compels us to examine and nurture existential, social, and moral dimensions of leadership that transcend its behavioral markers, instrumental utility, and commercial value. It does not require denying the mastery it may involve and the results it may achieve, or ignoring the hope that investing in it will generate a return. It requires, however, accepting that technical and economic frameworks cannot fully capture its essence (Petriglieri, 2020) or account for its value (Podolny & Hill-Popper, 2004). Art gives us a lens to see through matters of style and work with the human substance of leadership: the worries and wishes that leaders express, the experiences and expectations they evoke, the bonds they help us forge, the norms they encourage us to break, and the world they invite us to build.

I aspire this essay to be provocative in the way that *Fountain* was. I hope it will remind you that even when it looks like plumbing, there is still poetry in leadership, *if we so choose*. Put another way, when it comes to leadership, we are neither rational purveyors nor naive consumers. Leadership is complicated because we are always implicated. If leadership studies, education, or practice remain focused on technical and economic concerns, it is because we often regard leadership as a technical and economic enterprise. That instrumental regard makes us complicit in the dehumanization of leadership. It keeps us stuck in a sterile debate about what works and what sells, and oblivious about how that work shapes the material and social world, and whether it brings people to life and keeps cultures alive.

To humanize leadership, I contend, we need a different *regard*. I use the word in both the French meaning of “look” and the English one of “care” to point out that what we make of leadership, and the leadership we make, manifests what we care about. Following Weick (1995), I use the phrase “making leadership art” to highlight the interplay between interpreting leadership as art when we examine it, and enacting it as art when we develop it. A humanistic regard allows us to “look” into whether and how our efforts to bring leadership to life promote or hinder meaning and community—the well-documented

effects of art on human bodies and bonds (Magsamen & Ross, 2024; see also Pirson, 2017). It allows us to “care” for the torments and triumphs, the friendships and feuds, the plurality and politics of leadership.

“We tend to think of the artist’s work as the output,” producer Rick Rubin (2023: 47) argues, echoing Dewey’s (1934) view of art, but “the real work of the artist is a way of being in the world” (Rubin, 2023: 47; see also Langer, 2005). Seen as art, leadership becomes more than a process of influencing others toward a common goal (Yukl, Gordon & Taber, 2002). It becomes a way of being alive—a form of personal expression, social engagement, and political participation at once. A humanistic regard invites us to view outcomes such as attention, influence, and market success as corollaries of a working life that has personal meaning, that others invest in, and that improves the places we inhabit. A working life in which choice may well be an act, as Duchamp put it, or shorthand for the courage to surrender to mysteries that compel us, the discipline to give those forces voice and shape, and the willingness to let meaning emerge as we make and share our work (Martin, 1999). In keeping with the generative duality of the phrase, in the sections that follow I focus on what it means and what it takes to make leadership art, and then discuss how it can humanize the work of scholars, educators, and practitioners. Let us begin with the question, “What is the work of leadership if it is a work of art?”

## THE MEANING OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership, like any work of art, is easier to admire or critique than to define. Leadership is an ambiguous concept (Pfeffer, 1977) and leader an ambiguous identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). They mean different things in different places, for different groups, at different times. Therefore, its meaning is negotiated in relations (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). We might regard as a leader someone who does not hold a formal leadership role. We might resist someone whose title labels them head of this or president of that (Carton, 2022). We make leadership—we give voice, shape, and meaning to it—each time we identify a leader.

Leader is a consequential identity. Those who hold that identity think, feel, and act differently—and are thought of, felt about, and dealt with differently—than those who do not (for a review, see Hammond, Thrasher & Lester, 2025). In a study of managers with mobile careers, for example, my colleagues and I found that investing in developing their selves as leaders made informants feel equipped to navigate uncertainty and protected from anxiety (Petriglieri,

Petriglieri & Wood, 2018). Another study found that people who overcame concerns about claiming leadership were more likely to receive others’ endorsement and emerge as leaders in groups (Cunningham, Sonday & Ashford, 2023). Seeing oneself as a leader, and being recognized as one, furthermore, provides a powerful motivation to keep learning leadership skills and bid for leadership roles (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm & McKee, 2014).

Recognizing its social and dynamic nature, my colleagues and I have argued that leadership rests upon those “willing, able, and entrusted to articulate, embody, and help realize a story of possibility for a social group at a given point in time” (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015: 637). We invest in leaders who embody a way of life we aspire to, and help us build a space where we might live in that way too (Petriglieri & Peshkam, 2022). The moment we make leadership by making someone a leader, then, is a moment of clarity and opportunity. Examining those moments, I find, can bring us closer to what leadership means.

## A Moment of Leadership

The world is a mess because good leadership is rare. Some version of that trope sets up countless academic articles and popular takes. “Why is that?” I often ask when I give a talk or teach a class on leadership. Regardless of seniority, industry, or nationality, most people in the audience converge on one answer: “Because it is true.” “Have you ever met a good leader, then?” I ask next; “Have you witnessed *one moment* of good leadership?” Most hands go up. People think good leadership is rare and yet have vivid memories of their encounters with it. I love inviting them to reflect on how they knew that they were beholding leadership at work.

I find the conversation that follows this prompt a revealing window into the making of leadership. At first, people usually struggle to put their intuitions into words. Then come the accounts of surprise. The leaders that came to their mind seemed to have done something unexpected. They took the blame. Stayed calm while everyone was losing the plot. Listened without arguing. Challenged kindly. Then comes the unshakable sense that those actions were acts of care. I do not believe or trust everyone, people argue, but in that moment, I did. Here was a genuine leader, and they were good. When I insist, “How did you know?” someone eventually says, “I didn’t *know*. I felt it.” Everyone else nods, and words are found.

What people report feeling, in those moments of leadership, are an inner shift and an urge to act. “I felt

scared, and I became calm,” they say. “I felt bored, and I became excited.” “I felt confused, and I became clear.” “I felt stuck, and I got freed up—to say what I wanted to say, to imagine a different path, to do what had to get done, sometime even to leave.” When we revisit a moment of leadership, what we recall is not a moment of reason. It is a moment of freedom. We sense the workings of something beneath and beyond identity, more visceral than the cognitive attribution to someone of a label, in the making of leadership. It is an experience that can hardly be put into words and yet puts us to work. “I felt something, and we did something,” people tell me. Someone showed up and set us free. We know leadership, it seems, when we are *moved*. In both senses of that word, emotionally and physically.

I am aware that if I asked the same people, often executives with decades of work experience, a different question—“What is leadership?”—they would give me an answer that is much closer to the portraits of leadership in the academic and popular press. They would point to a set of virtues, attributes, or skills; to a process of persuasion and motivation; to an influential position, formal or informal, within a social structure. How often have you seen leadership portrayed as a conquest, like the achievement of a mountain summit, and explained as the hard-earned prize for mastering a list of personal and social skills? When we shift the focus from the definition to the recognition of leadership, however, those familiar portraits are revealed as fabrications—attempts to capture, articulate, and organize the features of what is, ultimately, an embodied experience of relating.

That is what I mean when I say that leadership is art. The work of leadership is the work of art—to move us. It involves evoking an emotional atmosphere, awakening the imagination, and (re)orienting purposeful action. It is not just motivating; it is enlivening. Leadership must move those who make it and those who behold it, and it must move from idea to reality, or else it dissipates. Treating leadership in such a way reconciles its universal with its local nature. While art is a universal feature of human living, what we regard as art, what we are moved to make, what awakens our senses and urges us to act, changes from person to person, from group to group, from time to time. It might be familiar or entirely new, or make the familiar appear new, and vice versa. The Springsteen songs that moved me as a teenager, enticing me to learn English and crave the open road, were obscure and obnoxious for my parents. Those ballads were beautiful and mysterious to me, and may have changed my life. I am not sure I learned more from a

three-minute record, as Springsteen (1984) claims in *Bobby Jean*, than I ever learned at school; but I learned in ways I never learned at school.

### What Moves a Leader Makes a Leader

A year before he died, Kurt Vonnegut (2006), the author of *Player Piano* (1952) and *Slaughterhouse—Five* (1969), received a letter from a class of high school students asking for life advice. “Practice any art,” he wrote back. “Music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what’s inside you, *to make your soul grow*” (emphasis in the original). In a few lines, Vonnegut articulated a vision of art as a reflective and expressive activity, challenging a common definition of art as something we do “for its own sake.” Art only looks that way seen from an instrumental perspective focused on the “money and fame,” but Vonnegut suggests an alternative to that focus on financial and social utility, a purpose other than achievement. The purpose of discovering, defining, and developing our selves—and embedding that process in relations and perhaps in institutions.

Vonnegut’s exhortation exemplifies a humanistic regard. It reveals a way of looking at work and caring for work that casts growth—psychological, social, and moral development—as an end rather than as a mean (Nussbaum, 2011; Selznick, 2008). To embrace such regard does not require dismissing instrumental concerns—that is, diminishing the importance of productivity or thwarting the aspiration to profit from one’s work. It only requires rejecting the subordination of humanistic aims to instrumental aims (Petriglieri, 2020). For example, resisting the urge to make a business case for personal growth, close relationships, and hospitable institutions—and maybe asking the human case for a career or a business plan.

A humanistic regard suggests a definition of art as any work we are moved to do primarily, even if not exclusively, by humanistic aims. Art, seen this way, is not a term for a different kind of work; it is a term for a way of engaging with work (Dewey, 1934; Fine, 1992; Langer, 2005). Bollas (1979) argued that art has a developmental function when we create it as well as when we appreciate it. Building on Winnicott (1975), he theorized that the experience of being moved by art is the adult equivalent of early experiences with caretakers. The experience of a relation that holds us as we grow. What was once an experience before and beyond words—a mixture of

possibility and connection—becomes one that we sense yet we cannot put into words. Unless we borrow Vonnegut's (2006) words: an experience of becoming. Art then can transform those who make it and those who resonate with it. When its resonance is broad, it can transform the culture in which artist and audience live as well.

Leadership as art involves an “act of choice.” to return to Duchamp, that may appear as a choice to think and speak and act for oneself. However, once you look closer, it is a choice to become, to belong, and to build with others. What makes a leader is a choice we make to invest in a way of life and to build a place—a group, a company, a country—that values it. The artist brings to life a character, a story—representing Juliet (Shakespeare, 1597) on a stage, painting the *Universal Judgment* (Buonarroti, 1541), singing *Imagine* (Lennon, 1971)—which enlivens an audience. When both are moved, art is made. Similarly, a leader brings to life a product, a service, an organization that enlivens a group. (Plumbing is many a leader's poetry.) When both are moved, leadership is made.

Compulsion and its refined version, commitment, in art, come before calculation. That might be how we sense that a work is a work of art. “We search in the arts not simply for the signs of skill,” Gopnik (2024: 9) observes. “We search for the signs of a unique human presence. ... [A] unique way of entangling their learned virtuosity within their unique vulnerability.” The leader is compelled to articulate a way of life, to embody it with their gestures, and to realize it with their work. Others may invest in that leadership, to degrees that vary from stopping to look and think, to giving money, work, or even their life. What moves a leader, if it moves others, makes a leader.

Putting the choice to become, bond, and build at the core of leadership, let me repeat, does not mean neglecting propriety, proficiency, or profit. Most artists strive to master a body of skills, to remain productive and visible, and to make a living with their work. Once we take a humanistic regard, however, mastery and recognition, technical and economic achievement, become the consequences of a commitment to bring something to life.

### Making Better Art

A humanistic regard is openly normative: it rejects the idea that any human life or system is as good as any other, and calls us to investigate (and invest in) what makes them better (Selznick, 2008). My humanistic regard is informed by a systems psychodynamic perspective (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). When

I say that leadership involves an “act of choice,” therefore, I do not imply that those choices are rational or conscious—only that it is useful to recognize them as choices, because once we do, we can interrogate their origins, meaning, and consequences. If we deem them misguided, dull, or harmful, we can make better choices. In keeping with a systems psychodynamic perspective, I regard development as making better choices, and better choices as those that foster integration and pluralism (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2022). The more selves, relations, and organizations develop, the more capacious they become—that is, the more they are deliberately able to encompass different and even conflicting principles and practices. Conversely, when people cannot develop toward integration and pluralism, they remain stuck defending embattled selves and fragile systems.

Development need not be conscious or deliberate, at first. Much art is made by people who may never call themselves artists—that is, children. Why do children, say, play music? Long before their parents take them to music lessons, or they decide to learn to play, children begin to hum, sing, bang things, and dance. Depending on how much they and the people around them enjoy that form of expression, they might stop altogether, believing that creative pursuits are not for them (Harrison, Hua & Deasy, 2025). Or they might pick up an instrument and begin to practice, with the encouragement, or in defiance, of those around them.

Most artists begin that way—not with a resolution to become an artist, but with a resolve to make (a certain) art part of our life. We discover an inclination, and we develop it by devoting hours to studying the work of others and doing that work ourselves. Springsteen (2016) picked up a guitar, he writes in his autobiography *Born to Run*, to escape the tension in his household. With a telecaster around his neck, he soon discovered, he felt more free. Once he could play well enough, for a long decade, he wrote songs about people around him, working-class folks hit by the closing of local factories, and played gigs for those same people in bars across the Jersey Shore. He credits those anonymous years as formative of both his skills as a performer and his voice as a songwriter. Long before selling millions of records and selling out stadiums, before overt political engagement, he was *just doing the work*. Over time, he began to glimpse a larger purpose for that work—to keep a flailing American Dream alive. Practice came first, purpose later—not the other way around.

This attitude appears to be common to exceptional performers across many fields (Stulberg, 2026). More

than clarity or strength of ambition, they have the discipline to cultivate their craft day in and day out, even when it appears futile and there is no spotlight in sight. They harbor a belief that what they are doing is worthy, that they might lose something essential if they quit—they might lose their selves. Many an artist's oeuvre is a celebration of that defiant spirit amidst the temptation to give up, an aesthetic reminder of what I consider the most important attitude to develop leadership, one's own or others': faith in the work. It takes work for a teenager compelled to strum a guitar, clamoring for attention and disrupting conversations in the household, to become a good musician. That work of developing, of *becoming good*, is broader than mastering musical skills; it entails reflection and refinement.

A humanistic regard demands that we reflect upon how well a leader, as an artist, uses their work. Is it in the service of satisfying an impulse or honoring an intent? Is their work imposed on others, or are we invited to interpret it and make it our own? In what way does it strengthen the fabric of the culture they are part of? The same regard suggests that developing leadership art involves refining it—making it more intentional, inviting, and significant.

### THE MAKING OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership need not be developed, at least not in the sense I articulated above. It might emerge “naturally,” like the first artworks likely did, and much art still does—from the encounter of an impulse with a wish. A classic example is the rise of a narcissistic leader whose impulses excite the imagination of a vexed and anxious crowd. First recognized by Freud ([1921] 1955), narcissists' craving for leadership (Steffens, Chong & Haslam, 2022) and their appeal as leaders (O'Reilly III, Chatman & Doerr, 2021) remain current topics of study and concern. When such leaders capture our imagination, passion is ignited, defensiveness and polarization ensue, and nothing much is learned or built (Fitzsimons, Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2025). Freud ([1929] 1955), however, also noted that work in general, and art specifically, can help us transcend those antisocial impulses that prop up defensive and disruptive leadership. Beneath much interest in leadership development, I like to believe, is an aspiration to gain some mastery over the urges that make leadership impulsive, imposing, and antisocial, and to use their energy to forge and follow more curious and more generous forms of leadership.

Taking a systems psychodynamic approach, I illustrate that aspiration for leadership development in Figure 1. This humanistic approach postulates that much behavior is moved by unconscious urges shaped by the social systems we live and work in (for reviews, see Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, 2020, 2022). Building on Lewin's (1947) idea that human behavior is the product of individuals' makeup and their environment, I picture these two domains as two worlds. We live in and must work with both. Our inner world is shaped by our personal history and aspirations; the push of the past and the pull of the future mobilize our desires, what we are compelled to feel, think, and do. Our social world is shaped by the incentives and opportunities that surround us. The push of rewards and the pull of possibilities mobilize our duties, what we are convinced we ought to feel, think, and do. The effort to move in ways that fulfill our desires and our duties makes us who we are.

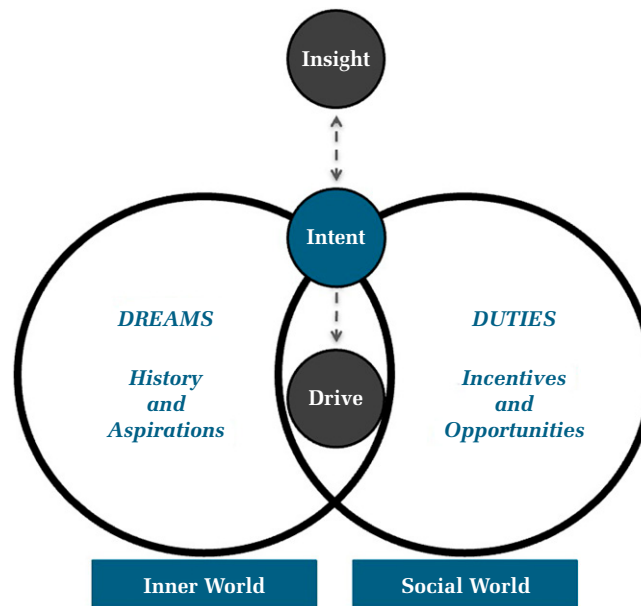
When we find a place where those align, we settle in the conviction that we will get what we want if we do what we must, and we get to work. We question neither what we want, nor what is expected of us. In that state, we work as artisans, unconsciously moved by the *drive* to give the world a shape that powerful people in our past, and around us, have drawn. We may, sometimes, take distance from both worlds and rise above them. We then work as critics, those whose *insight* moves us to comment on the efficiency, beauty, or morality of what others make and how they live. The artisan may be skillful and the critic thoughtful; they may even be artful—but neither is an artist. What I call an artist, and a leader, is someone who lives between those two positions, who strives to remain embedded in their inner and social worlds but takes neither for granted, and hence tries to see and shape them anew.

Leadership, once developed, is grounded and free. The leader is moved by an *intent* to live and work in certain ways, extends an *invitation* to share and sustain that life and work, and organizes an *intervention* that shapes the culture of their place and time, keeping it alive. Below, I focus on each of those three movements involved in developing leadership art.

### Movement I: From Drive to Intent

The first act of leadership development involves examining, through reflection on lived experience, with others, the ways our drives unconsciously inform our habits—and then refining, through experimentation, a deliberate intent that reclaims our choices and gestures.

**FIGURE 1**  
**The Forces That Shape Leadership**



*Note:* Insight = detached analysis, the state of observing people and systems without a personal stake—that is, the “analyst” or “critic” state. Intent = reactive engagement, the state of being in touch with both inner and social worlds without taking either for granted—that is, the “leader” or “artist” state. Drive = habitual enactment, the state of just doing what our history has taught us and the environment rewards—i.e., the “follower” or “artisan” state.

What distinguishes an artist, and a leader, as I argued above, is their intent—a longing to reveal and remake their selves through their work. An intent is a claim to a life we long to live and to work we long to make. “Longing and striving are essential to our species’ joy,” Andrew (2025: 12) observes, “and we begin to hold our own selves captive when we exchange them for convenience.” The first act of development, then, must inconvenience those who aspire to lead with a key question: Am I using my energy and skills to satisfy my drive in this system, to remove myself and critique it, or to honor my intent for the system?

When moved by drive, we are trying to prove something—that we can endure, belong, perform. When moved by intent, we long to make something. An intent moves us to make choices that, Newark (2018) argues, generate the most human forms of leadership; conscious choices to defy both rational critiques that highlight the futility of our efforts and irrational drives that idealize the significance of those efforts. (Good leadership, like good art, begins in a place between despair and delusion. A place of hope.) Developing requires rejecting the belief that our lives and worlds are fated and embracing a more generative one: That our inner and social worlds can be honored without being humored.

In that respect, intent is a paradox. It is a choice that entails some degree of surrender. It involves a deliberate choice to accept that we are influenced by the unconscious, and must draw on it as a source of inspiration. At the same time, it involves a disciplined choice to appropriate those unconscious influences, to give our life and work a shape of our own. In our most artful moments, we choose to surrender but we do not surrender to choose. We trust the wisdom of our inner and social world and question their directives. We may not grow out of them, but we grow through them and make something out of them. That thing is our art.

In the autobiographical motion picture, *The Hand of God*, Paolo Sorrentino (2021) narrates his beginnings in cinema following the death of both his parents in a house accident. The faulty stove that intoxicated them would have killed him, too, had he not received a last-minute ticket to go watch Diego Armando Maradona play in his hometown of Napoli. The movie title is a double play on Maradona’s famous hand goal to England in the 1986 World Cup and the director’s narrow escape, which he portrays as a miracle attributable to the football divinity.

The bereft teenager is determined to leave his hometown to pursue a passion for cinema. Lacking

any connection in the industry, he engineers an encounter with a famous director who quickly rebukes his plea for mentorship. The boy insists, until the elder turns around and confronts him. “Lo tieni un dolore?” (Do you own a pain?) “Yes!” the boy replies.

The climactic scene dramatizes a classic epiphany: The realization that a pain one is driven to escape, if owned, will become a gateway to one’s art. Sorrentino’s cinematic explorations of nostalgia have made him an Academy Award winner and a living exemplar of how art “helps people to cope and recover while engaging those who see their art, who come away with greater understanding and empathy” (Magsamen & Ross, 2024: 94). Owning a pain can turn an ending into a beginning. It can make us heal and grow (Hemphill, 2024). So can leadership (Ganz, Lee Cunningham, Ben Ezer & Segura, 2023; Maitlis, 2020).

A drive is akin to a “hidden commitment” (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) that compels us to make choices and gestures that feel familiar or safe but are, in fact, convenient and confining. They shield us from some fear, some loss, that we would rather not deal with. As Sorrentino illustrates, the revelation of one’s intent—recognizing it and committing to act upon it—requires first a confrontation with those habits, often precipitated by an encounter with trusted others who help us reflect upon, not react to, our experience (Petriglieri, Wood & Petriglieri, 2011). Those confrontations that help us recognize the way of life we intend to pursue, articulate it clearly, and embody it consistently, are the origin of leadership art. They help us abjure the familiar and manifest our intent in our life and work, seeding our life’s work.

That integration matters because like every artist, leaders have two jobs. One is making art, for example by composing, painting, or sculpting; the other is representing their art. We expect coherence between the way artists use their tools and the way they use their bodies (Ladkin, 2008; Sinclair, 2005). We expect, say, a composer to look and feel and act a certain way. Even in the throes of passion, we expect them to be somewhat . . . composed. We expect Taylor Swift to turn a phrase and sing in tune and look the part of the prom queen bouncing back from a bad breakup. Living an artistic life is part of making art. The same is true for leaders, who must put equal emphasis on their technical and cultural performances. If they ignore the former, productivity suffers. If they ignore the latter, credibility goes.

The artist who can integrate both, working within a system while claiming originality, entices us. Take Michelangelo, who accepted the Pope’s commission to decorate the Sistine Chapel, on the condition that

he could paint the figures in his biblical fresco naked, a license deemed scandalous by many of his patrons (Pietrangeli, 1986). The intent to embody a way of life and produce a body of work that challenges some norm gets the artist attention. However, not many artists have Michelangelo’s fortune. The attention can be short-lived. Artists and leaders frequently go down in flames, combusted by the heat of expectations, or become irrelevant amidst the cooling of others’ interest in their work. They touch us briefly, but they cannot hold us.

We may heal and grow making art, but if no one gathers around us and our art, the solitude might overwhelm us and we might lack resources; hence, our growth might stall and the work might not last. Excepting, of course, those rare artists whose work gained traction after their demise. This possibility is (or should be) a concern for any artist and leader who aspires to be valued in their lifetime—if not for personal vanity, for the opportunity to keep making their art. An intent is sustainable when it is resonant. We invest in art when we recognize ourselves, our predicament, through the artist’s work. Similarly, we invest in leaders who represent us, or, more precisely, the selves that we aspire to be (Ellemers, De Gilder & Haslam, 2004; Freud, [1921] 1955; Hogg, 2001).

Such investment is neither sudden nor universal. While some may be moved by the intent manifest in an artist’s or leader’s life and work, others may feel threatened or fail to understand it. History is full of artists ignored, derided, or even persecuted. To work with intent is risky and can be costly. This is why artists often gather. Working with intent requires connections that help us sustain the clarity, recognize the value, and bear the solitude that comes with it. A leader who lacks those connections is the equivalent a starving artist.

## **Movement II: From Imposition to Invitation**

The second act of leadership development focuses on relationships. It involves examining, through reflection on lived experience, with others, the relations that shape one’s leadership (Feldman & Kahn, 2019). It then entails refining, through experimentation, a way of relating that invites others to share and sustain one’s intent, helping them bring it to life in the way they work and in the products of their work. Lack of material resources, I find, seldom stops people from making their best art or leading with intent. (Much art, like much leadership, begins with scarcity.) What stops us is lack of clarity, courage, or care. All three are products of lack of connections with

people who invest in our intent. Meanwhile, plenty of connections help us remain confused, cautious, callous—in a word, captive. If the first act of making leadership art fostered emancipation, then, the second must foster commitment.

Relationships are trenches, Hemphill (2024) observes, where the battles for personal growth and social change are fought. When we are moved by drive, we tend to impose its prescriptions on others as much as on ourselves. Those others, in turn, may respond in ways that fuel our drive, making it feel necessary and inevitable. To move with intent, then, we must invite others to join the struggle with the drives that script our relations. Since our drives are contextual, their force is not constant. With some people, in some spaces, we can keep them at bay. Then, we become curious and generous, like artists at their best. With other people, in other spaces, we succumb to our drives and become anxious and proud, like artists at their worst. Put another way, our every move is affected by social gravity.

I use that metaphor to describe the pull of others on the trajectory of our life and work. The constraints and prescriptions that people identify when they examine their drive tend to be associated to commitments to others. Most people who enjoy a measure of material success tend to be surrounded by what I call “friends of performance”—others who recognize and reward them for doing what they have long been doing and might be seeking to cease, or broaden, or transcend. They are the equivalent of those friends who caution an artist not to leave a secure job. Those people are reasonable, reassuring, and restraining. There are other relations in our lives, however, that inspire and challenge us to imagine ourselves differently (Petriglieri, 2024), help us inhabit more spacious selves (Kahn, 2025a), and flourish as a result (Colbert, Bono & Purvanova, 2016). I call those people “friends of learning.”

If friends of performance comfort and caution us, admire and reward us, friends of learning challenge and accompany us. They form communities of care that take an interest in each other’s growth rather than their success or status (Hemphill, 2024). In a collection of interviews with 43 artists describing the making of a signature piece, Moss (2024) found that there was often someone in those artists’ accounts who anchored them yet pushed them forward. “Making art is an ordeal,” (Moss, 2024: 17) he wrote, made bearable by those who witness the ordeal and wish the artist well in it. The impressionist painters are a classic example. Their intent to portray everyday scenes and objects, like toiling farmers or

a lunch outdoors, and displace biblical and battle scenes from the center of artistic iconography, was controversial and unpopular in their time. In a study of “collaborative circles,” Farrell (2003) chronicles how those young painters’ friendship helped them keep going and refine their work. He observes that “boisterous and combative” (Farrell, 2003: 44) collegial groups are fertile soil for groundbreaking work (see also Becker, 1982). They help members question assumptions learned from prior socialization (what I called our drive) and focus on negotiating a new “set of assumptions about their discipline, including what constitutes good work, how to work, what subjects are worth working on, and how to think about them” (Farrell, 2003: 11).

Invested friends who “sustain and surprise us” (Odell, 2020: 28), in short, are the most significant resource we need to honor our intent and bring it to life in our work. They feed our art long before our art may feed us. They help us examine and challenge our drives. They care for who we are trying to become and keep us accountable for living up to it. They help us grow, and they make us last. Hence, a key element of leadership development is becoming deliberate in making friends of learning and being better friends of others’ learning.

Being such a friend is more demanding than being a friend of performance. It requires the capacity to “hold” others, to meet them where they are, and to accompany their journey of bringing leadership to life (Kahn, 2025a; Winnicott, 1975)—more like a producer in the recording studio, less like a gallerist who sells work on commission, or an audience member who critiques or claps. Friends of learning might be a nuisance at times, too, as they challenge our beliefs and habits. This is why many friends of our performance will never become friends of our learning. They have no interest or incentive to do so. They do not care enough about us, or they care about keeping us driven. There might be some, however, who would be delighted to invest in our learning. The only reason they remain friends of our performance is because we have not made the choice and made space to relate differently.

Making friends of learning begins with the simple choice to focus on who we are and who we want to become to each other, instead of what we need to do and how. Making space for those conversations, regularly, is how we claim our intent and invite support for it. “We are best able to take up our personal agency,” Kahn (2025b: 8) observes, “when meaningfully connected to supportive others.” For that reason, the focus on giving feedback in leadership

development must be complemented with an effort to witness and wish. Knowing what we do well, and what we can do better, is important (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). So is knowing that others can see our struggle and wish that we could be freer, bolder, less preoccupied or rushed; that we could manifest more of our selves in our work, so that they could, too, and get to know us, and understand and enjoy our work all the more for it.

“Great art,” Rubin (2023: 180) observes, “opens a conversation rather than closing it.” That is the power of art, when art is developed, when it is good. It fosters communion while letting us express individuality. Once the artist has done their work, if we are moved, we are invited to do ours. Friends of learning are the first to accept our invitation. They hold our leadership so that, as leaders, we may hold others. (It is hard to hold others in ways that we have not been held.) Integrating social reflection on one’s drive and social reinforcement of one’s intent makes leadership development more realistic and sustainable. However, the sociality of leadership does not stop with close others. Once we have revisited the pull of people around us, and refined our invitation to them, we must expand that consideration to the broader community in and for which we make our art. Who is likely to welcome and support our art, who might misunderstand it, and who might repel and oppose it, and why? Moving toward those questions allows a reckoning with leadership, like art, as a cultural intervention, and of leadership development, a contemporary art form, as a political one.

### Movement III: From Prediction to Intervention

The third act of making leadership art involves making a shift from the attitude of an analyst, who takes the world for granted as it is and attempts to predict the odds that a certain action might result in a certain outcome, to the attitude of a leader, who imagines the world as it could be and attempts to change the odds that certain actions will result in a certain outcome. That shift involves reflecting upon the state of the culture one’s life and work is embedded in and refining an intervention that strengthens the fabric of that culture.

So far, I have argued that leadership touches and holds us. Any work can be regarded as a work of art when it expresses an individual’s intent and attracts others’ investment. However, if growing and lasting were the only purposes of leadership, or any art, then we might consider it as an indulgence, an affirmation of individuality and connection for their own sake. At its best, art is more consequential. It moves us to build a better place in which to live and work. It is a cultural

intervention as much as an avenue of expression and a conduit of connection. After emancipation and commitment, the third act of leadership development fosters community.

I understood that key element of leadership when Annie Peshkam and I set out to study the work of “marginal leaders” whose role does not come with an established template. To orient and organize their work, and demonstrate its value, these leaders had to claim their intent in relation to established leaders and their organization (Petriglieri & Peshkam, 2022). We found that doing so involved taking a stance on the state of the organization’s culture, usually based on experience, and building spaces where others could learn how to strengthen that culture. We discerned three stances that express leaders’ intent in relation to their culture.

The first stance is that of the *custodian*. This is a leader who believes the current culture is too loose and is moved to strengthen it. The aim is to move people toward a norm and help them embrace that norm and embody it more consistently. Author and authority are usually aligned in this case. The work of the former bolsters the power of the latter. Think of a classical musician who accepts a government’s commission to compose a symphony to celebrate their country’s anniversary; or an executive with long tenure who takes up the role of traveling between their company’s subsidiaries to represent its values and explain why those values matter. Those artists and leaders might be praised, by some, for their loyalty—especially if they capture a sense that the culture is under some threat. However, those who are not enamored with the status quo might accuse them of cowardice, subservience, or selling out.

The second stance is that of the *challenger*. This is a leader who believes the current culture is stuck and might have become oppressive. Their aim is to move people to deviate from the norm and help them find new ways, their own ways, to think and act. Author and authority are usually at odds in this case. The work of the former challenges the power of the latter. Think of the first rock and roll singers, whose guitar riffs and hip gyrations challenged the melodies and mores of the 1950s; or an executive determined to “shake things up” and empower people outside the inner circle to renew products and processes at their company. Those artists and leaders might be praised, by some, for their courage and imagination, especially if they capture a sense that the culture is stifling and risks becoming obsolete. However, those who value the status quo will accuse them of irrelevance, ridicule, or even treason.

The third stance is that of the *connector*. This is a leader who believes the current culture has become fragmented and even polarized. Their intent is to bridge groups who do not understand or commune with each other. Author and authority are strange bedfellows in this case. The former complements yet complicates the power of the latter. Think of a famous tenor who organizes a music festival that brings together opera singers and pop artists to bridge different genres; or an executive who sets up a shadow council of young talents to advise the executive committee. Those artists and leaders might be praised for their openness and inclusivity, especially if they capture a sense that a lack of collaboration is weakening the culture. However, those who prefer to stay within the bounds of their identity groups might accuse them of lacking commitment, fostering inefficiency, or being difficult to understand.

An artist and a leader are never just working in a culture. They are working on and for that culture. As art, leadership is a cultural intervention, a statement in an argument for, or with, the tradition in which they are embedded. A stance, in that sense, is more than a style. It is based on a conviction, shaped by experience, about what a community needs at that moment in time—more cohesion, more challenge, or more connections. By stating, embodying, and working to realize their intent, the artist is then coming to life and keeping culture alive. This is why artists are always useful, and when a culture is ailing because of its dispersion, rigidity, or isolation, they become necessary. Their work intervenes to change that.

The etymology of the word “intervention,” originating from the Latin *venire* and *inter*, to come in between, helps us understand the work of leadership and the work of art. It is an effort to put oneself in the middle, not just between a troubled present and a better future, but between reality and ideal. While the forms of leadership development that those three types of leaders pursue might seem to be focused, respectively, on developing competence, courage, or connections, they can be understood as interventions to realize ideals of communion, autonomy, and pluralism. Treating it as art, then, allows us to strengthen the moral dimension of different forms of leadership (Lemoine, Hartnell & Leroy, 2019), and surface the political agenda of different views on development (Vongswasdi, Leroy, Claeys, Anisman-Razin & Van Dierendonck, 2024).

What makes art resonant is that it speaks to us. What makes it powerful is that it speaks for us. The artist gives words and shapes to sentiments about our current state we did not know how to, or did not have the courage to, articulate. (Art often speaks of our

longing for roots, freedom, or bridges.) Artists might require moments of solitude, but art does not thrive in isolation. Think of Commedia dell’Arte or electronic music—they began as experiments and grew into movements. Leadership follows the same trajectory. Hence, leadership development must help people devise experiments, in their work, that begin to build the world that they imagine and that that they are inviting others to live in, as well. To produce art and leadership that moves others, in short, intent is not enough. We need courage to claim it and capacity to show it (Detert, 2021). Once we do, our expressions of care for some group, for some culture, will often challenge other groups, other cultures. It is important for leaders to recognize who their work is for and who will benefit from what they build, integrating personal exploration with social commitment, not to be blindsided by its effect.

Modern art is more overtly political, in the sense that, like Duchamp’s *Fountain*, it eschews a concern for traditional canons of beauty “to actively engage [an] audience and spur them on to change the world” (Chatterjee, 2014: 146). However, there is still art that attempts to skillfully emulate traditional canons of beauty, which echo figures and proportions in nature. That art soothes people to strengthen the status quo, just like there have been artists who challenged the status quo with stirring stories and images in every epoch. This is why it is useful to regard leadership as art—so that we are not blind to the moral aims of different genres of leadership development, including those that claim not to be political at all.

### Making Art in Practice

So far, I have deliberately avoided describing specific pedagogical tools and specific forms of leadership—or, as they are colloquially known, styles. Art can be made with a variety of tools and result in a variety of forms. We might even want to speak of leaderships, in the plural, like we speak of the arts (Grint, 2000). However, the art is neither in the tools nor in the form; the art is in the work. We develop our leadership art when our choices and gestures reveal an intent, when we invite others to share it, and when we intervene in the fabric of our culture. We learn to make better art every time, everywhere, we have opportunities to reflect upon our choices and gestures, through experience, and refine those choices and gestures, through experiments. Reflection begets refinement, and refinement begets reflection. The process turns craft into potential art, as a private production becomes a public performance.

Facilitated reflection and social experimentation, whatever methods we use to foster them, must be pillars of leadership development. They allow us to experience and examine our drive, surface and sustain our intent, and invite others to join us in making an intervention. Let me offer one example of what this work looks like in practice. I was observing a group conduct a common activity in leadership development workshops—one of those simple tasks that lets people work with each other in competition with other groups. The group's members were senior managers from a global company. When I met them, they had told me that while the company was doing very well indeed, something needed to shift in the way people worked together. Getting things done took more effort than should have been needed, and people reported high levels of stress and burnout. The workshop was part of a series of initiatives meant to foster "agile collaboration" and more humane leadership "in the digital age."

I kept that remit in mind as I observed the group at work. They impressed me as creative and action oriented. Quickly, two or three subgroups started prototyping solutions. Then something happened. People became engrossed in their work and hardly spoke. The subgroups were not quite competing, but they were definitively not collaborating, which meant that they were doing double the work with limited tools. That constraint made them both creative and preoccupied with how to use the tools they had. Each subgroup managed to complete the task independently, amidst the others' cheers. High fives ensued.

Once the enthusiasm for that extravagant display of competence subsided, I had to give the group a few minutes before we started debriefing. Several members were literally catching their breath. "What did you just perform, as leaders?" I asked, as I often do. As often happens, someone retorted in response, "Do you mean *how* did we just perform?" I clarified that I did not:

I can see that you performed very well, competently and creatively. You even managed to organize to complete the task in different ways. My question is what performance did you put on, as leaders? What culture did you bring to life?

As they began reflecting upon their experience, the managers realized that they had staged a scene that resembled their daily work lives. They had felt driven to let everyone "do their thing," and then felt responsible for "making it happen" without disturbing others. The freedom was exhilarating. The responsibility was exhausting. A devotion to autonomy, the

ideal beneath their drive, put into practice made collaboration feel inappropriate, intrusive.

Through this lens, or more precisely with this regard, it becomes possible to examine what leadership performances afford, and what they demand. Or, as I put it colloquially, what our drive buys us, and what it costs us. In this case, the quasi-conscious choice to not interfere with each other, either to invest in one idea or to ask for help, preserved everyone's creative autonomy, but demanded that people proved they could make it on their own. It was a competent performance of an exhausting culture. All it took to understand it was looking at these leaders' work as a piece of art. It gave meaning to their disconnection and power to their reconnection; the power to change culture. If culture is manifested in leaders' choices, changing the culture requires making different ones, such as saying "Would you join us?"

## SO WHAT?

My intent for this essay was to make leadership art and share a humanistic regard for leadership and its development. If you have got this far you will have understood this piece as my *Fountain*—both a personal point of view on the prescriptions and critiques of much writing and teaching on leadership, and an intervention in the leadership culture of our times. If this is artwork of some sort, it must provoke but not prescribe. However, the genre I am working within, academic writing, calls for some discussion of how regarding leadership as art may be of use—so let me offer some invitations instead. The broadest one is this: If you are developing theories of leadership as a scholar, developing students of leadership as a teacher, or developing yourself for leadership, please do acknowledge your involvement in the production of leadership principles and the performance of leadership practices. You, too, are an artist. Your work brings leadership to life. Studies and stories give meaning to leadership at work. Voices and bodies give it shape in the workplace. Principles inform performances, and vice versa. Regarding those lines of work as artistic endeavors lets us consider their value and function anew, as humanistic as much as instrumental enterprises, broadening what we ask about leadership and its development and what we ask of leaders as they develop.

## For Artists of Scholarship

Far from removing it from the purview of scientific inquiry, regarding leadership as art can help us to

integrate and expand efforts to study leadership from positivist, interpretivist, and critical perspectives. Over the past decades, the growing field of neuro-aesthetics has brought the natural sciences and the humanities closer to investigate how evolutionary and cultural influences affect the art we make and enjoy (for a review, see Chatterjee, 2014). A similar effort might nudge leadership studies toward becoming a social science that draws on the humanities to “take seriously the subjectivity and historicity of experiences” (Selznick, 2008: 20); a science that tackles normative questions about “what ends are appropriate and what means are effective” (Selznick, 2008: 57) in leadership and development; a science that holds both accountable for strengthening people’s “integrity and moral competence” (Selznick, 2008: 68) and countering a “technical sophistication... paid for by restricted vision and responsibility” (Selznick, 2008: 89; see also Dion, Freeman & Dmytriiev, 2022; Petriglieri, 2020; Voronov & Weber, 2020).

Jennifer Petriglieri and I have argued that the portraits of leadership that transpire from most studies and courses are plagued with two forms of dehumanization: Its elevation to a supernatural virtue and its reduction to a set of mechanical practices (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015). In the decade since we wrote that call for humanizing leadership as an embodied and embedded practice, the importance and urgency of that effort has only grown. The marriage of convenience between technology and capitalism (Petriglieri, 2020) has generated dozens of products that erode attention and fuel polarization, raising existential questions for organizations (Puranam, 2024) and societies (Zuboff, 2019).

A humanistic regard of leadership as art, I contend, encourages us to defy dehumanizing imperatives that seek to mechanize leadership for profit, idealize it for political advantage, or both. This regard urges us to refuse, as Odell (2020: xvi) suggests, “a frame of reference in which value is determined by productivity, the strength of one’s career, and individual entrepreneurship,” and to challenge the stereotype that managers “concerned with doing something beautifully are seen as less powerful and less effective” (Taylor, 2002: 835). Making leadership art, however, means more than caring for its beauty. It offers a frame to treat art, and leadership, as ways to grow, get closer, and keep culture alive.

The claim that leadership is art is a synthesis of several streams of recent research. It lets us do what many scholars have argued we need to do. First, it invites us to embrace a more dynamic and social conception of leadership (DeRue, 2011; DeRue &

Ashford, 2010; Lord, Day, Zaccaro, Avolio & Eagly, 2017) and to examine the trajectory of its development from individuals, through relations, to their collectives (Lord & Hall, 2005; Nieberle, Braun, Epitropaki, Bysh & Morgan, 2026). Second, it helps us accept the challenge of “broadening the developmental focus” (Day et al., 2014: 79) of our work as a form adult development (Day, Harrison & Halpin, 2009). A view of leadership as art welcomes consideration of early life experiences that shape individuals’ attitudes (Riggio & Mumford, 2011) and narratives as leaders (Ligon, Hunter & Mumford, 2008; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Zheng, Meister & Caza, 2021), as well as experiences in domains beyond work (Hammond, Clapp-Smith & Palanski, 2017; Petriglieri & Obodaru, 2019). Making leadership art can be a way to grow through traumatic experiences (Maitlis, 2020), apply epiphanies that resolve intra-psychic tensions (Dane, 2024), repurpose painful narratives (Ganz et al., 2023), or revisit limiting schemas (Maitlis, 2022; Petriglieri & Sheprow, 2025). It may let us mature and operate in a system without being captive to that system (Palansky & Barclay, 2026). Third, art is the quintessential socio-symbolic object; hence, this view encourages work on leadership and its development as objects of socio-symbolic work (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019)—that is, reflexive, intentional efforts to shape selves and organizations (Phillips, Lawrence, Caza, Heaphy & Leroy, 2025) and realize a moral order (Lemoine et al., 2019).

The humanistic regard I am promoting here also allows us to mount better critiques of inadequate and regressive views of leadership, as scholars have argued we must. Take the idealization of leadership as the trait of extraordinary individuals who shape world affairs (Haslam, Alvesson & Reicher, 2024); or the upbeat leadership tales that airbrush the reality of people’s experience in the workplace (Alvesson, 2020); or even the elevation of leadership above management, as common in scholarship as it is in practice (Kniffin, Detert & Leroy, 2020). We may cast these as reactionary art, convenient portraits and fictions that justify existing power arrangements (Learmonth & Morrell, 2019; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015). A humanistic regard helps us move beyond idealistic notions of leadership (Alvesson & Einola, 2019), while acknowledging that ideals will always be involved in making leadership art.

I part ways with portraits of leadership that cast it as an art to glorify it, splitting it from the grind and greed of working lives. Those too are part of making art. In that respect, a humanistic regard allows us to make space, when studying leadership, “for the

missing language of thriving and suffering, joy and sorrow, congratulations and condolence; and of the lovely, the magical, and the mystical” (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen & Smith-Crowe, 2022: 375). Finally, making leadership art might make us less judgmental about the ebb and flow in popularity of various concepts of leadership. As Goodsell (1992: 250) puts it, “the fashionable must and always should go out of fashion ... aesthetic theory suggests that this is a natural and healthy sequence, not a sign of disintegration and disorderliness within the discipline.” If leadership is art, the variety of its forms must be celebrated. Chatterjee (2014: 179) observes that art follows a single paradigm only in repressive regimes, which subjugate art to a dominant group. As soon as repression wanes, art forms expand. Art, he concludes, “signals our freedom.”

A humanistic regard for leadership liberates scholars in three ways. First, we are free to open the aperture of our inquiry from the motivation of followers toward a common goal (Yukl et al., 2002) and focus on where the impulse to motivate comes from, how it gets reinforced or resisted, who gets moved to do what, and how those goals change shape. Second, we are free to be normative to pay more attention to aesthetic dimensions of leadership (Hansen, Ropo & Sauer, 2007). We can recognize that a skillful and inspiring creation might be bad art—that is, impulsive, imposing, and antisocial—and a modest gesture might be great art—intentional, inviting, civilizing. Third, we are free to locate ourselves in our work and in the world. This essay embraces the view that acknowledging our personal involvement in what we study and teach makes our work stronger (Amabile & Hall, 2021; Anteby, 2013; Petriglieri & Ashford, 2023). A regard for that work as the making of art urges us to practice a more “passionate scholarship” that is “personally meaningful and socially relevant” (Courpasson, 2013: 1243; see also Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Fleming, 2020; Howard-Grenville, 2021). “Theorizing humanly,” Cunliffe (2022: 11) argues, requires “sensibility, sensitivity, reflexivity and imagination,” and must be judged for its resonance. It is like art, in that way. Ashford and Sitkin (2019) note that identifying as leadership scholars implies a desire to make a difference. Once we regard leadership as art, studying it becomes a form of intellectual activism (Contu, 2020), a way to put research to work and bring values to life. There is a cost, however, to this bounty: It is admitting that there may be no such thing as evidence-based leadership or development—and there should not be. Held in humanistic regard, leadership and development are

always value-based. Evidence can, and should, inform how we go about realizing ideals (Selznick, 2008).

Freeing our scholarship on leadership and development from the captivity of an instrumental perspective focused on technical efficiency and economic benefits, as I have tried to do here, might help us transcend debates about “what works” and “what sells” in leadership development. Scholars, I among them, are fond of expressing concerns about the evidence base of leadership development offerings, even if some evidence suggests that many of those offerings do incorporate well-proven practices, such as experiential learning and feedback (Leroy et al., 2022). One reads that leadership is “BS” (Pfeffer, 2015) and its development is a “robbery” (Beer, Finnstrom & Schrader, 2016), calling into question the ethos of those who purvey, and the discernment of those who purchase, leadership and development whose effectiveness is unclear. My argument suggests another possibility—that the popularity, and perhaps the value, of leadership and development might be independent of its “effectiveness.” More precisely, that its benefits for individuals, organizations, and society might not be captured by common markers of effectiveness such as skill acquisition, career advancement, or various financial measures, as suggested by Vongswasdi et al. (2024).

If leadership is art, developing it might enrich us in more ways than that. If we want evidence that it does, we need to assess benefits such as psychological integration, freedom of expression, social cohesion, or political participation—the very benefits that scientists ascribe to making and enjoying art (Magsamen & Ross, 2024). In a classic piece about how people value things, Podolny and Hill-Popper (2004) used the art market to illustrate the distinction between hedonic and transcendent conceptions of value. In the former, art has value because of what it does for us; in the latter, because of what it does to us. Sometimes we purchase art as a financial investment, and its value can be easily measured. Other times we do it to feel and look good. Art is still an investment, but in pleasure and status, which are more elusive. (We invest the most in art, of course, when we make it.) Instead of arguing that people should buy better plumbing, then, we should ask about why people buy bad art.

Extending that argument, allow me a more provocative speculation. Some may actively, if not consciously, avoid gathering evidence of leadership development effectiveness because they regard it as a space for art. Leadership development might be an “unmanaged space,” in Gabriel’s (1995) sense—an

enclave to escape the instrumentality that dominates organizational life. Hence, the more instrumental concerns with measurable efficiencies pervade organizations, the more humanistic forms of leadership development, concerned with the pursuit of well-being, community, and empowerment, may become popular. Leadership development might become a space to cultivate “the human capacity for rebellious spirit and irrational commitment—the capacity to defiantly follow strong drives for their own sake and to devote oneself to endeavors from which one does not anticipate rewards great enough to justify the devotion” (Newark, 2018: 209). Attempting to prove its career and economic benefits, in this case, and make a business case, might even be counterproductive. It would defy the purpose of balancing humanism and instrumentality (Petriglieri & Peshkam, 2022).

### For Artists of Pedagogy

My invitation for those who make leadership art by designing and facilitating leaders’ development is to consider two facets of helping conceptual productions turn into embodied performances: the work of exposing people to good leadership art, and the work of helping them make it their own. The former is the work of a curator. It involves judgment about what good leadership looks like, and ability to present it, balancing information about the context that gave origin to the work and invitation to forge a personal interpretation of that work. The latter is the work of a master. It involves transmitting requisite skills, facilitating the formation of developmental connections, and evoking the desire to keep making and learning.

To simply help people adhere to a model of leadership, in this view, is a surrogate of leadership development. It entices us to follow someone else’s template, and hence reinforces our drive. Like art begins where painting by numbers stops, leadership begins where conformity stops. Models are useful if they are broad enough—think rock and roll, or cubism—for us to make them our own. I find that models (including this one) work best when they are not prescriptive of action, but prompt us to revisit who we are and how we work.

The pedagogy of leadership as art also integrates and builds upon recent research. First, it concurs with the idea that training in specific techniques might be done in discrete, focused periods and spaces such as a one-off “program.” However, putting those skills in the service of one’s intent instead of one’s drive takes time, and it unfolds across spaces.

It requires a process and a system of development (Day, Bastardo, Bisbey, Reyes & Salas, 2021; Day & Dannhäuser, 2024). As Ganti, Ashford, and Cormier (2025: 193) note, becoming a leader entails personal growth that “can feel more akin to an art form than a science.” The broader frame of leadership as art brings the science of development in support of examining a “pain of the present” (Ganti et al., 2025: 194) to transform it into “possibilities for the future” (Ganti et al., 2025: 195), through creative efforts such as public narratives (Ganz et al., 2023) or entrepreneurial projects (Frost, Jung, Rencher & Batts, 2024). Second, leadership art can only be developed through opportunities to reflect on one’s experience with others, in workshops and at work, and receive feedback from experts and peers (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). Like all artists, leaders may benefit from spaces where they can develop their identities alongside their skills (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010) and be exposed to “informed criticism of their actions in an available form” (Dégot, 2007: 38). Iterative cycles of action, reflection, and feedback refine one’s skills and hone an attitude of “reflective engagement” (Petriglieri, Wood & Petriglieri, 2011) that enhances the ability to continue learning in and through one’s work, even when it appears repetitive. Third, the regard I shared invites us to balance leader and leadership development (Day, 2000; DeRue & Myers, 2014). As artists in the making, developing leaders need to integrate various influences into a signature intent, make friends of their learning, and render their work influential. They also need to reckon with the moral dimension of their work (Lemoine et al., 2019) and recognize, as Dégot (2007: 40) put it, “career success as being a means rather than an end: a way of gaining more freedom of action, which brings some advantages but also added risks and obligations.” Art helps us foreground the “current, embodied, aesthetic nature of leadership” (Sutherland, Gosling & Jelinek, 2015: 607) to prepare leaders for the responsible use of power. Art also makes it easier to introduce “narrative imagination” and “dramatic rehearsals” in our schools and workshops (Starkey & Tempest, 2009), making them “enriched spaces,” as scholars of neuro-aesthetics call those spaces designed to focus attention, evoke emotion, and foster community (Magsamen & Ross, 2024).

As for our scholarship, my argument invites a reconsideration of our roles more than of our methods as instructors. If what we do is art, we must be clear about what moves our pedagogical work, and why others might find it moving. The typology of interventions I offered above can help in that endeavor, as leaders

with different stances require different learning spaces. Supporting custodians requires offering opportunities for deliberate practice of requisite skills, with role models and frequent feedback. Supporting challengers requires opportunities for reflective engagement with habits and cultures, with generative questioning of what is familiar, why, and what one might wish to do instead. Supporting connectors requires opportunities for collaboration between different groups on challenges common to all, with sensitive holding that reveals the potential value of friction (see Petriglieri, 2019, 2025).

If leadership is art, mastering requisite skills is absolutely necessary and yet not sufficient. In the sections above, I outlined a template for leadership development in three movements: Helping people show up with intent, extend an invitation, and make an intervention. Personal expression and collective concern need to go hand in hand. Learning initiatives therefore need to integrate personalization, giving individuals the opportunity to discern the art they aspire to make, and contextualization, giving them a chance to reflect about the significance of their art for their collective (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010, 2015). I was tempted to use the word “impact” here, but I regret its popularity. My view of leadership as art, among other things, attempts to wrestle it from the grip of a discourse of warfare. No leader or teacher should think of their work as a meteorite or a bomb—but I digress.

In keeping with the regard that I shared here, I think of my leadership development work as hosting ateliers where people can craft, amidst friends of their learning, the gift of leadership they intend to bring to the world. An atelier is a space of imagination and experimentation, a shared space for personal and political work. A few months ago, I met a participant in one such workshop that I had hosted for a group of executives at a fast-growing tech company. Five years later, she told me, its effect endured in the way people worked and in the way they worked together. I was intrigued and I asked her to clarify. Without prompt, she used the same categories I used above. “People take more responsibility. We listen to each other and join each other’s work. We state how our projects aspire to affect the organization.” Then she paused and said something that I found arresting. “It let us make a moment.”

I have thought of that turn of phrase since. Perhaps that is the work of art at its best. It goes beyond making new meaning of oneself and putting more meaning in one’s work. It makes time, a moment, to recognize or question who we are and who we want

to be and to begin the work of becoming that person. Ever since, I think of leadership development as the art of making spaces and moments that free people up and bring them together to improve their world. Embracing a humanistic regard for leadership as art, and for its development as an art form, in summary, does not diminish our ambition; it raises our aspirations. We can, and we should, ask more of leadership development than to accelerate careers and align organizations. We should expect it to foster well-being and community, autonomy, and responsibility at once; to make us live, together, better.

### For Artists of Practice

My invitation to those who aspire to lead is most straightforward. You want to do the work of leadership? Be prepared to do the work of art. It will involve anxiety and exhilaration. It will require surrender and discipline. That work entails expressing yourself, evoking others’ resonance, and orchestrating interventions that shape your culture. Too much leadership, perhaps like too much art, is just a way to seek attention and influence. Its form is pleasing, familiar with a twist, and its function is to reinforce conventions. However, in some cases, perhaps the best cases, there is more to leadership and art. Courage and care support a choice to accept uncertainty and defy norms. Be mindful that making that choice, or being chosen to represent it, will put you at odds with those who cherish conviction and conventions.

Pay attention to the leaders you follow, because they will become the influences on your art; but beware of duplicating their work, or there will be little art in yours. Take one of the most admired business leaders of the last decades, Apple cofounder Steve Jobs. He was concerned with aesthetic even as he worked in technology, and invited people to build a world in which we now live much of our lives. His leadership art inspired other leaders to emulate him and build the digital spaces we inhabit. Viewing those leaders’ performances as cultural, rather than technical, might help us critique them better. Regardless of the language of revolution, many of those interventions are reactionary art, in that they strengthen the status quo and steepen inequalities of attention and reward (Odell, 2020; Zuboff, 2019).

Cultivate the irreverence of an artist and the discipline of an artisan. The former will hold you in good stead in the moments of creation, the latter in the months of production. Stop asking the questions, “How do I get attention?” “How do I exercise influence?” “How do I overcome resistance?” Ask yourself

instead, “What do I truly care about?” “Who do I care for?” “How can I show that care consistently, in my words and deeds, and in what I am making?” “In what ways does my work bring people together, reassure them, and free them up?” Remember that leadership is not something you do, it is something you make. Your intent and your work bring it to life. Since it is alive, and it is art, do not be surprised that there will be irrationality in its reception. That the more popular your art becomes the more questions will be raised about the authenticity of your intent, the sincerity of your invitation, and the significance of your interventions. That those whom your art inconveniences will regard it as distasteful, unrealistic, irrelevant, of little value in the “real world.” Again, you will need friends.

Never let anyone call you a future leader. Have you ever heard of a future artist? If you have something to say or do, a piece in mind, begin making it now. I share Goodsell’s (1992: 252) view that seeing your work as art does not make it esoteric, only meaningful; it provides those “who find it difficult in the harried and fragmented nature of their everyday work lives, with an ability to regain a sense of self-worth and achievement.” Thinking of yourself as an artist will help you be more curious and generous, as artists know that we are always a work in progress (Kreiner & Sheep, 2009). It will remind you that your job is not just to make the machinery of your organization more efficient and profitable. Once you make it art, leading becomes a means to transform mechanistic organizations into hospitable civilizations where people can work safely and freely to keep the system functional and fair. If people live well in your art, your art might even survive you.

### Before We Part

This essay was a plea for humanizing leadership by making it art—that is, treating leadership principles and practices as expressions of intent, invitations to connection, and interventions on the culture of our times. We want more art, I argued—but do we need it? I bumped into that question as I was writing the first draft of this article, when I found myself tempted to buy a piece of train that, evidence showed, no longer worked—as a train, at least. It had become a ready-made. It was a square of the old Metro Alpin, the funicular train that brought people to the Allalin glacier, above the Swiss village of Saas Fee. My children and I have attended alpine ski racing camps there for nearly a decade. The train had been in service since 1982. When time came to replace it, a local artist acquired it, cut it up, and framed the pieces. As I

thought about it, purchasing a piece of Swiss engineering turning to art like a 40-something mechanical Sisyphus with a midlife crisis seemed hardly rational. The piece had little potential for resale, I told myself, yet I became troubled by the idea of “letting the train go.”

My children are growing, and they have lost interest in ski racing. We no longer go to glaciers together. As I age, it will become too taxing for me to train at high altitude. I wondered if I was just being nostalgic. When I consulted my daughter, who has spent many joyful moments on that funicular, she told me that if I were to buy the piece, one day she would love to have it. “I’ll keep it in my house,” she said, “and someday, I’ll look at it . . .” She did not finish the phrase. There was no need to. I hope the day when she will look at it and I no longer can is many years away. However, when it comes, the train will bend the laws of physics and do the work of art: to keep us alive and bring us together across places and time. This essay is no different. I made it to share my life’s work with you across space, to snatch a few pages of permanence from the inexorable passing of time, and to remind us both to do something moving with the space and time we have. I hope you do not buy my arguments; they were meant to be and make us free. I hope you will be moved to make them yours.

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