

# Leading Inner Conversations

By Rens van Loon and Ronald Meijers

*“Come on! You can do better than that!!” shouts the almost archetypical parental voice from the stands. As kids, we internalize this voice – and others – which typically pops up when we feel the urge to up our game, whether in the midst of a round of golf or during a pivotal presentation in the boardroom.*

*In this essay, we invite you to take a look into your inner conversations and reflect upon their quality. We believe it is essential to transform our internal discussions into dialogues, otherwise it will be impossible to effectively lead ourselves, and consequently, others. How we describe these inner dialogues is inspired by Hubert Hermans’ Dialogical Self Theory.*

*We use this perspective to explore the leader’s inner theatre, as a space in which we live, a combination of external and internal space. The external and the internal infuse each other and therefore result in a dynamic, not a static,*

*self-other dichotomy. Without this notion of a connected inner and outer world, we don't think leadership would be possible. In our view, leadership is a give-and-take relationship between two or more individuals. There is no leadership without followership; none of us is always a leader or a follower but we continuously combine those two quintessential roles. Leadership implies the intention to achieve something of importance for both the leader and the follower. Hence, we describe leadership as the result of a mutually beneficial and transformative interaction between leaders and followers.*

Do you know yourself? What thoughts spring to mind when we ask this question? Which assumptions underlie these thoughts? Do you, for example, believe there is a core self, an essence that we strive to discover in the course of our life? Or do you think there is no such thing and that we construct a self based on positive and negative experiences? Reflecting on our values and beliefs, observing our ways of working and assessing our strengths and weaknesses are all crucial routines, in which we think leaders should learn to excel. More often than not (according to Gallup, in four out of five cases), people accept a leadership role which is a mismatch with their competencies and their personality. Besides the systemic errors such as promoting people based on performance rather than potential, a lack of realistic self-knowledge prevails. In our view, the root-cause of this flawed self-image is the absence of a constructive internal and external dialogue. It is not a lack of feedback, nor a lack of experiences, but the inability to listen to the different voices (both internal and external) and take the time to understand them, ask open-ended questions, and embrace the often contradictory stories they tell us. Our internal voices may stem from the different roles we fill simultaneously, so for example, in my role as a career-maker, I may bring a different perspective than I would as a team player or in my role as a parent. What are the voices you hear in yourself? And how do you make sure you appreciate their wisdom?

### Ronald's story: please don't let me be misunderstood

During my 'formation' as a trainer/coach for Krauthammer in Zermatt in the summer of 1989, I was immersed in the notion that we always have an influence on others. Whether good or bad, whether intentional or not, whether big or small. At times, I felt utterly helpless and frustrated about the impact I apparently had on others. I wanted to shout "no, this is not who I am! This is not my intention at all!" Oh Lord, please don't let me be so misunderstood...

I remember my despair at not feeling any control over the way others perceived me. And, after the burning tears, I also remember the immense relief. Because it dawned on me, that what I couldn't control, I could let go. I felt liberated, enlightened almost. Until the real implication struck me: even if I couldn't control my impact on others, I was still co-accountable for it and so had to learn to separate observation from interpretation. If I could do that, take a more independent perspective on both my own behaviors and that of other's, I could potentially find common ground and hold up a mirror without offending anybody. I could learn to deal constructively with people who at the time were smack in my allergy zone. To achieve all this, I needed to change the conversation in my head, especially the one I typically had when I felt I had failed to achieve the outcome I was aiming for. Rather than criticizing myself for my incompetence, and wondering what went wrong, I learned to ask myself less violent questions such as: What really happened? Who did what exactly and in reaction to whom? What could have been their intention? What was mine? How can I be more effective next time? What should I do differently? And how can I anticipate counterarguments or emotional reactions? Once I learned to have an inner dialogue, I noticed I could move it closer and closer to the action in a particular moment, whereas an inner debate typically disconnected me both from the situation and from myself. When I am in a flow, I can 'see myself in action' whilst still being in action. But probably

most importantly, it helps me to take full responsibility for my own behavior. I learned to acknowledge what transpired and admit that ‘yes I did say that’, and ‘indeed I raised both my voice and my eyebrows while taking a step forward’ and I was also better able to notice in the moment how the other person hunched his shoulders and lowered his glance.

---

Being a leader means having a feedback intensive role, simply because of the variety and the intensity of the relationships that need to be built. If we embrace the notion that leadership is about mutual influence between a leader and follower, then we should pose the following key questions: ‘how can we both reach our purpose?’ and ‘how can we each take full responsibility for our common purpose?’ We should also stop thinking about leadership in hierarchical or authoritarian terms like ‘how can I, as the leader, make my followers do what I want?’

### *Many top managers confuse ‘sending information’ with communication*

Without self-observation in action, the leader’s ability to switch to a different, more appropriate, modus operandi can be seriously hampered. Sticking to a thoroughly prepared script without room for in-the-moment improvisation, is only effective in a totally predictable world. When things don’t work out as planned, our internal and external dialogue may make us feel low or high, close to our self or far from our self. Self-awareness of what happens with us in this combined inner and outer space is needed to gain accurate knowledge of our unique strengths and weaknesses, our values and beliefs; without self-awareness, we are likely to develop and maintain a significant number of blind spots.

Leadership implies seeing the self as open and dynamic, not as a static, more or less predefined essence of who we are. In our view, the self is a ‘society of mind’, hence a living, continuously evolving whole, which is part of a larger,

external society. A dialogical self implies that there is no static self - other dichotomy, but rather an inter-dependent infusion of the internal and the external.

This is important for leaders and members of organizations, as many tend to define themselves in a static self - other relationship: 'We' – the board – have communicated the strategy intensively during a series of interactive roadshows versus 'They' – the middle management – failed to translate our messages to the frontline.

Many top managers confuse 'sending information' with communication, which implies a balanced two-way process. This also applies in a hierarchy. Hierarchy within organizations may instill the belief that some people are more important than others, when in fact all they do is play a different role. Hierarchy not only works top-down but also bottom-up: many direct reports expect important decisions to be taken by the board, when in reality, their contribution to these decisions and their implementation is pivotal. For success, they are all necessary, whilst none of them is individually sufficient. If the importance of the role is confused with the importance of the person, the horizontal relationship – which is essential for dialogue and for leadership – is broken.

We participate in our organizations in constantly shifting roles. In those roles, two 'I-positions' are always present: I as a follower, and I as a leader. And these two positions cannot be separated. We can't be in only one role. No matter how high you have climbed the ladder, you will have to follow the rules of law, the decisions of supervisory bodies, the sentiments of clients, shareholders or voters. The static dichotomy we tend to adopt doesn't help: if we believe (mostly unconsciously) that once someone has a management position, they are the leaders and all those who are 'lower' are the followers, we (unintentionally) turn leadership into the permanent problem that most organizations think it is.

The power of dialogue is therefore immense, and creating the conditions to make dialogue happen is vital; both inside ourselves and with others, as well as within organizations and between them. We believe that, once you have established a foundation for dialogue – truly listening, visibly showing respect, suspending judgment before voicing your view – leadership will replace hierarchical coercion and our impact as individuals will increase.

Dialogue can help us transform conflicting voices in ourselves into harmonious singing or at least enjoyable humming. In a society of mind, the same things happen as in the outer world: there is a non-stop buzz of opinions coming from different I-positions. Our intuitive 'I' criticizes the rational 'I'; the relaxed 'I' encourages the ambitious 'I' to take it easy and the action-oriented 'I' ignores the suggestions of the patient 'I'. And so on. But our external roles also make themselves known, broadening the spectrum of opposing views. 'I as Senior Vice-President' should let go of the 'I as a chemical engineer'; 'I as captain of the rugby team' doesn't mix all too well with the 'I as a pastor in the Anglican Church'. Becoming aware of the variety of I-positions is one thing, focusing on the most important players in our inner theatre is another. What do you consider to be your most influential internal and external 'I's? Which are the related rational and emotional dilemmas? What 'cognitive silos' have you developed and how can you open up to alternative perspectives?

The ancient Greek aphorism 'know thyself' or 'gnothi seauton', written at the entrance of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi is as relevant today as it was in the days of Plato. But how does it work in practice? To what extent do we use self-knowledge to define our priorities? A client of ours is a successful engineer, with a strong track record in technological projects, who is now responsible for innovation. He told us that his key challenge is to convince the board and his peers of the necessity and the urgency of innovation in a conservative, routine driven, technical environment. We helped him to

understand how his personal style was part of the challenge, given that he described his core I-position as ‘I as listener to my inner voice’. He acknowledged that listening to others first was critical if he wanted to bring them on board. Silencing his inner voice was not easy for him, but he soon discovered how his readiness to understand their needs and worries paid off. He didn’t have to push his conviction anymore, instead he was invited to share his perspective.

*Dialogue can help us transform  
conflicting voices in ourselves into  
harmonious singing*

In our work, we often encounter the following opposing I-positions: ‘I as a team-player’ and ‘I as a winner’. The competitive self often turns into a kind of stubbornness that may have helped managers get where they are today, but – once arrived – hinders their effectiveness. ‘I as a winner’, or even: ‘I as a fighter’ can refer to our propensity to get results, act independently and look for new territory to conquer. On the other hand, it may also imply a lack of empathy or even ruthlessness, self-centeredness and an inability to yield.

Developing self-knowledge implies having an inner dialogue in which there is space for pride and humility, but also for questions about the way we express our different I-positions and what they reveal about our deepest fears and needs. Do we crave winning because we really want to be heard? Or is it a mechanism to prevent being hurt? We often see how old patterns reproduce unintended consequences today. If our parents didn’t listen to us as a child, we may have learned that the only way to get attention is to perform, to win. And if our feelings were systematically hurt when taking initiative, we may have developed into the perfect antipode, namely a loyal team-player. Without going through repetitive processes of self-discovery like this, it is very hard to be the leader of the conversations in our head. In our experience,

we can't control or suppress these voices, but we can learn to listen to them and to respect them. We can learn to accept our emotions ("I feel irritation when acting stubbornly"), bodily sensations ("when I am stubborn my body is stressed and stiff") and suspend our judgment ("In my position, it is not appropriate to feel irritation or act stubbornly"). We can train ourselves to energize certain voices and to move our focus away from others. This exercise might result in becoming the leader of our inner dialogues, of the often unpredictable conversations in our head. This might also result in becoming a more effective communicator in the external world, as the mechanisms are essentially the same.

*Teams who dedicate themselves to practicing dialogue ultimately perform better and create memorable moments together*

Another way to describe the impact of leading our inner dialogue is that we create space in our trains of thought, feelings, and behaviors that we normally experience automatically. We like to use the Japanese word 'ma' which means both space and time, to illustrate the richness of the concept. Masayoshi Morioka introduced this word to describe what a dialogue means for the quality of interpersonal relations. The process of asking questions, listening respectfully and postponing judgment creates unique ma between persons. The character ma indicates the space between you and me, including the creative tension. Ma can refer to relationships with others and to connections with different voices representing different I-positions. Lastly, ma can also refer to a pause, a silence in the internal or external conversation.

If, for example, as a candidate member of a (supervisory) board, you are scrutinized by an external supervisory body, your success will depend on the extent to which you are able to use the STARR-method and Reflect (the last R) on a Situation in which it was your Task to perform certain

Actions leading to a Result. We have prepared quite a few executives who, besides feeling insulted by the process, are not necessarily accustomed to opening up their inner theatre, neither for the eyes and ears of other people nor for their own. Our job was to show them the doors and give them the keys.

Teams who dedicate themselves to practicing dialogue ultimately perform better and they create memorable moments together along the way – although some may be painful ones. There may be moments of frustration, of being willing to open up but not yet being able to do so. For instance, when one team member opens his or her inner theatre and the others are not yet able to suspend their judgment, but react in an automated, mindless manner, without actively listening. But there will also be moments of happiness when minds do open, one after the other, and there is the sensation of experiencing the art of thinking together, and the victorious feeling when we successfully swallow our pride and prevent the domination of one of the most tempting I-positions for people in senior leadership roles: 'I' as the superior one.

More often than not, one I-position dominates other inner voices like one individual dominates the team. When we work with the chair of boards, it is initially about creating space, in themselves as well as in their teams; acknowledging polarities, recognizing opposing views and allowing them to start a dialogical relationship. In one board, the 'fatherly' chairman opened his eyes to the pain of one of his team members. He fought hard to not blame himself for this, to just listen to the story and to wait for a request to be formulated. He saw that they both lived in a different organization and that a shared perspective required space for conflicting truths to be told. Real team development starts when you, as a member, allow all others to have an impact on you; when you, as a team member, are willing to re-validate your view on yourself and the world around you in relation with the others.

---

### Rens' story: finding a safe place

I have been aware of my inner dialogues since my early twenties, particularly while studying psychology and during my practical training in sensitivity workshops, co-counseling, bioenergetics, and – what has become my specialism over time – Dialogical Self Theory. I would like to share an experience that influences my personal story.

In 2014, I took a sabbatical, a prolonged period of stillness, meditation and walking to give needed space to the sacred practices of thinking, reflecting and writing. I developed a synergistic partnership with my physical environment, allowing it to answer many of my unspoken needs by providing a beautiful garden, a workplace with natural light and fresh air, and deep, surrounding woods; I felt completely integrated and deeply content.

What I realized during my sabbatical is that silence and asking questions to voices in and around you is critically important. I experienced that 'the' answer is not within my power, but it can be given in dialogue, in the sense of accepting 'what is'. Through external and internal conversation, an answer may emerge. In my deepest self, I sense a lyricist; expressing life in symbols and metaphors, enabling me to understand, without creating the illusion that I can master my life. Through the process of my inner dialogues I learned: the answer is given by the Other.

---

Exponential organizations demand extreme adaptability. According to Salim Ismail, "constant learning is critical to staying on the exponential curve." This implies embracing external experts and interacting with a wide variety of people in a large and diverse ecosystem. "In order to live on the exponential curve and not get caught in the linear mindset of bureaucracy, you must be willing to be fired or fire yourself." He basically says: it's not about you, it's about the good of the

organization you're leading. Exponential leaders are selfless and at the same time self-confident. How do you reconcile 'I as selfless' and 'I as self-confident'? We don't think this will happen spontaneously, therefore intentional individual and collective 'I' dedication is needed. Adaptive challenges like these must be approached with internal and external dialogue.

*Exponential organizations demand  
extreme adaptability*

The leaders' task is to apply the ground rules of dialogue to themselves and to others. Creating space for dialogical reflection is condition zero for developing a realistic self-image. Our suggestion and our commitment is to practice the principles in every interaction. It starts with us. With me. With you.

[Rens van Loon](#) is a professor of Dialogical Leadership at the School of Humanities, Tilburg University, and a director of Culture, Leadership and Learning at Deloitte Consulting. He is specialized in leadership, organizational change, and transformation and has authored numerous books and articles. Rens graduated from Radboud University Nijmegen with a degree in philosophy and completed a PhD in social sciences and psychology. He has developed global leadership programs and worked closely with leaders and their teams in private and public sectors as a consultant for more than 25 years. Rens' work extends the concepts of Dialogical Self Theory, developed by the Dutch psychologist Hubert Hermans, to organizational leadership, drawing on social constructionism by the American psychologist Ken Gergen and the leadership framework of British academic Keith Grint. Rens is a Board Member of the International Leadership Association (ILA), and active in the International Society for Dialogical Science (ISDS) and the Dialogical Self Academy (DSA). He is the author of numerous books and articles.

[Ronald Meijers](#) is a Partner in Deloitte's Dutch Human Capital Consulting Practice, specializing in CxO level Leadership Development & Organizational Change. He is also an FSI partner, concentrating on culture change and innovation in the financial sector. Ronald has led professional service firms around the globe while holding several board positions, and conducting executive coaching, strategy facilitation and research for more than twenty years. He has published numerous articles about the practice and paradoxes of leadership and writes a monthly column for MT magazine, the largest management magazine in the Netherlands. Before joining Deloitte, Ronald was the co-chairman of the executive board of Krauthammer, an international consulting firm specializing in the behavioral side of change, human capital development and commercial excellence. He is also a member of ELP's Advisory Board.