

# The world is in desperate need of uncomfortable leaders – become one, please!

**Stefan Falk**



In my work with more than 4,000 leaders over the last 20 years, I've studied leaders in action in their real environments. I've worked with 60 different organizations in the US and Europe, from Wall Street banks to large industrial companies, with leaders at all levels from the C-suite down to first-line supervisors.

Assessing leaders is actually quite simple. Either a leader is effective or he or she is ineffective as a leader.

I call effective leaders *uncomfortable* leaders, because they thrive on pushing themselves out of their

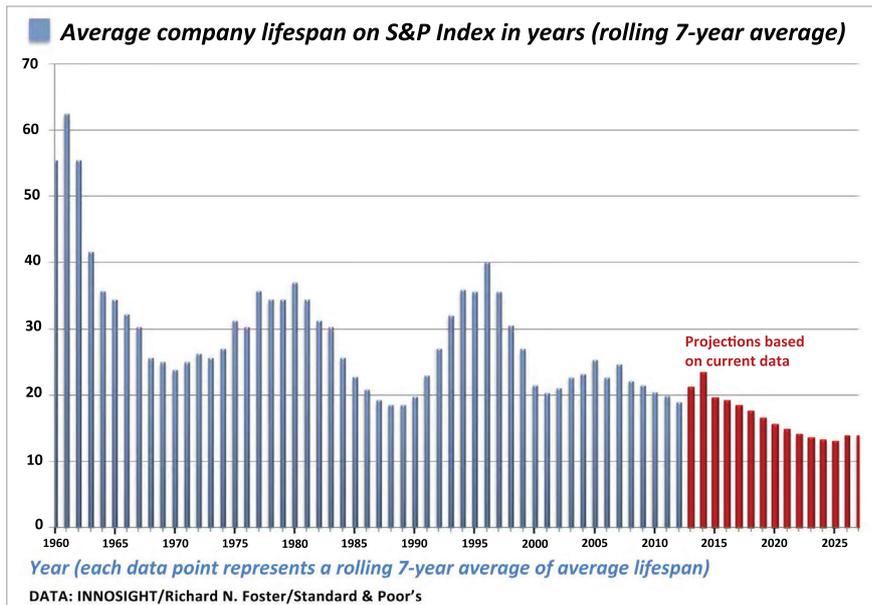
comfort zone on a daily basis. They pursue discomfort and uncomfortable things whenever that is important, which it is every workday for any leader.

Conversely, there are leaders who live and act fully within their zone of comfort and hence are deprived from any real chance to expand and develop their capabilities. I call these leaders ordinary leaders.

There are some clear and observable traits that differentiate these two types of leaders (see table)

**Table: Traits of uncomfortable leaders and ordinary leaders**

Uncomfortable Leaders	Ordinary Leaders
Actively pursue, prepare for, and welcome discomfort	Avoid issues and situations outside of comfort zone
Commitment to learning, expanding, and developing capabilities	Count on old and distorted knowledge
Listen and observe before speaking; think through consequences before acting	Speak and act based on habit
Question assumptions about themselves and others	Have firm and unchanging opinions about themselves and others
Evaluate people based on what they do, not what they say.	Divide staff into good and bad based on shallow criteria
Engage with and solve problems with staff	Talk <i>about</i> people problems, rather than solving them
Put needs of organization over his/her own needs	Put own needs first, especially in stressful situations
Face up to and deal with unpleasant realities	Refuse to face unpleasant realities, turning problems into disasters



life. By making a habit of always pushing yourself out of your comfort zone and facing challenges, no matter how steep or uncomfortable they are, you will acquire skills and stamina that you can leverage in all areas in life, not just in your professional leadership role.

**The majority of leaders are ordinary**

Based on my experience about 8 out of 10 leaders are ordinary, complacent leaders. Am I too harsh in my judgment?

Research performed by my ex-colleague from McKinsey, Dick Foster, with the consultancy Innosight, provides clear evidence that ordinary leaders are much more common than uncomfortable leaders. And the research reveal the effect ordinary leaders have on their business and their ability to survive the ever-changing business environment.

According Foster's research with Innosight, the tenure of the average firm in the S&P 500 narrowed from 61 years in 1958 to 35 years in 1980 and is now only 18 years. At the current rate of churn, 75% of S&P 500 companies will be replaced by 2027<sup>1</sup>. Foster says that to survive and thrive, a business must

1) "Creative Destruction Whips Through Corporate America, Innosight Executive Briefing, Winter 2012. See <http://www.innosight.com/innovation-resources/strategy-innovation/creative-destruction-whips-through-corporate-america.cfm>

constantly renew itself. My interpretation of this data is that businesses are failing without uncomfortable leaders.

**Becoming an uncomfortable leader**

People choose to become uncomfortable leaders; they are not born this way. For you personally, the choice of becoming an uncomfortable leader is the choice of a good

**The first step is to cultivate your leadership dream**

*A leadership dream describes what value and benefits you will bring to the organization and to the people around you through your leadership, since the sole purpose of a leader is to bring value and benefits to others. Your own needs are always secondary.*

A well-formulated leadership dream automatically gives you multiple advantages (see table).

**Table: Advantages of formulating your leadership dream**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It helps you automatically improve how you perform tasks.</b> Because your leadership dream is about what you want to become, it becomes a natural part of your planning and execution any given task.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It helps you to prioritize among opportunities to expand and develop your capabilities, and among different leadership paths.</b> Your dream provides an ever-present sense of what is most relevant to pursue in a specific moment.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It helps you turn failures into learning opportunities.</b> Working towards your dream teaches you to celebrate effort, not just outcome.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It fuels your performance.</b> Your leadership dream drives your attention toward what you do and how you do it.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It gives you a sense of purpose and control.</b> Your dream helps you pursue mundane tasks with more energy and gives you a sense of control over your own destiny.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It helps you pursue uncomfortable tasks, issues and situations.</b> The dream creates its own reward system. As a result, even when you are forced to do things that are painful, you will feel rewarded, since you will perceive how the pain you experience is necessary for getting closer to your dream.</li> </ul>

- ➔ But you need to write your leadership dream down. When you write it down it becomes real – and this is the first step to getting it “into your system.” The end product of your work will be a two-page dream document outlining your leadership dream. You create this dream document by answering four questions in writing (see Table).

**Table: Elements of a leadership dream**

Element	How people describe you	Feedback that people volunteer	How you describe your daily leadership	Behaviors you will follow
Detailed Question	<i>What specific attributes would people describe?</i>	<i>What would staff say to me after we interact?</i>	<i>What leadership goals do I want to achieve after each workday?</i>	<i>What observable behaviors must I aspire to?</i>
Examples answers	He can solve complex problems. He applies analytical skills to mobilize staff.	With your help, now I know how to manage this. You really understand my development needs	In every decision, I had the best interests of the business in mind. I helped my staff in a concrete way.	<i>Treat all people as assets with unlimited potential. Always be on time. Always stick to the facts.</i>
Benefits	Helps you shape your behaviors to change perception	Creates framework for how you prepare and interact with people	Strengthens management habits in a positive direction	<i>Adhering to these behaviors creates a higher level of performance.</i>

**1. How would people describe you to others?** Ask this: *How do I want my staff, my leadership colleagues, and my boss to describe me as a leader when asked?* Their answers should be the things that would make others want to meet you, work with you, or hire you. The more detailed you make this answer, the easier it is for you regulate and shape your own behaviors and approaches to achieve the **desired perception**.

**2. What feedback should people spontaneously give to you?** Ask this: *What do I want my staff, my leadership colleagues, and my boss to think and say to me after we have interacted?* Answer this question with two

or three attributes that can create an ever-present mental framework for how you prepare and execute your interactions with people. One example: “Stefan, your help on this matter has truly been invaluable, now I know exactly how to manage this.”

**3. What do you want to be able to say to yourself?** The third question describes how you should be able to describe your daily leadership. Think about concrete accomplishments that cut across the answers to the two first questions. One example: “In all my interactions I had the best interest of the business and the people in mind in how I acted and what I said,”

**4. What behaviors will take you closer to your leadership dream?** Ask this: *What observable and tangible leadership behaviors must I continuously aspire to so I can live up to the answers to questions 1, 2, and 3?* Don’t mix up behaviors and outcomes; for example, “always secure all necessary facts” is a behavior whereas “being fact-based” is an outcome. I’ve found that there are three behaviors that every uncomfortable leaders should pursue, since they catapult any leader into a higher level of performance and development. You should incorporate these three behaviors in your leadership dream document (see table).

Table: Mandatory leadership behaviors for an uncomfortable leader

<p><b>1. I will treat all people around me as assets with unlimited potential.</b> I know that every person I meet in my leadership role has unlimited potential in terms of performance and development, no matter his or her current level of performance. I will also try to learn something from at least one person every workday. Whenever I experience tension in a relationship with a colleague, I should proactively solve the issues with the colleague and never talk behind that person's back.</p>
<p><b>1. I will always be on time for appointments and keep promises – without exceptions.</b> I know that being on time with all my tasks and meetings is a simple way for me to become much better at planning as well as thinking through how best to execute all my tasks; hence it drives my growth in a very tangible way. Keeping promises makes me much more aware of what I promise and what other people perceive that I have promised. And by understanding how others perceive what I have promised, I better understand not just others, but my own behaviors and how I express myself.</p>
<p><b>2. I will always stick to the facts.</b> I know that trusting my experience is not enough. I need to make sure to securely understand facts before moving into action. Whenever I face a situation that calls for a decision or an action, I sort everything I know about the issue or situation into three buckets: a) What I am really sure of (with the reasons that I am sure), b) What I believe but am not sure of, and c) What I don't have a clue about. Based on that classification, I make a conscious decision on whether or not more facts are needed.</p>

### Now get feedback from constituents

When you've built a first version of your leadership dream document, you must get additional feedback and input on your current leadership. You do this by sending a simple survey to these people:

- All of your current staff
- All your leadership peers

The respondents should answer anonymously since you should not be biased by your perception of a respondent when you read his or her response. What you should look for are patterns among the respondents, not what a single respondent writes. Furthermore, when people answer in writing, they tend to be constructive and thoughtful, even if they answer anonymously.

The survey should include these three simple questions:

1. How would you describe my key strengths as a leader in terms of my behaviors and skills?
2. Regarding my behaviors and skills, how would you describe my key development needs – areas where I could improve?
3. Are there any habits or behaviors I have that you think I need to tone down or cease to become more effective as a leader?

### Engage your staff in monthly progress review meetings

When you have reviewed and collated respondents' answers, you

can use them to identify ideas for refining your leadership dream document.

When you think your dream document is complete, you must share your dream document with your staff and make them a part of your journey toward your leadership dream.

For most leaders this is completely counterintuitive and uncomfortable. But in my experience, when leaders get over this barrier and actually engage their staff in their leadership dream, they immediately experience the power and effectiveness of this approach (see table page 22).

So simply send your dream document to all your staff as a group email and call for a meeting to go through your document. →

🔗 **Table: Benefits of engaging your staff in monthly progress review meetings**

You take an instant leap forward in being open and transparent about your own need for development.
You make your staff aware of what you aspire to become as a leader, which will change their expectations and deepen their understanding of you as a leader.
You put pressure on yourself to be genuine about your leadership journey, and to work on it actively. Telling others about what you intend to do is an even stronger motivator for action than telling yourself.
You are sending the strongest signal one can send in a work place that personal and professional development is a key priority.

**The meetings with your staff**

Here it is very important that you share whatever “negative” feedback you have received through your survey. If you don’t, your staff will not perceive you as being serious, hence they will not be honest and helpful in this meeting, nor in subsequent meetings concerning your leadership journey.

Run through the document and then invite your staff to share their individual reflections and ideas based on their reading of the document. Summarize the key points in the discussion, and write them down. The compilation of these notes from similar meetings will become like a diary for your leadership dream.

Lastly, agree on a set of follow-up meetings with your staff, at least once per month. Continue the progress review meetings for at least a year. For some of the leaders I have worked with, these monthly follow-up meetings have become a permanent part of their development; they have also turned into meetings where all staff shares their progress in their personal and professional development with each other.

**Work with a relevant daily development target**

Simply select ONE task every day for which you *predefine a desired outcome/benefits then think about a tactic for achieving the benefits, and especially focus on what will challenge you and feel uncomfortable* (this is the space where growth actually happens). Write down your new behavior. And every day, *evaluate* how you did.

When you have selected a task to do differently, think through these questions to define the benefits you want to achieve:

Ask yourself:

- *If I really perform this task better, what are the direct and indirect benefits for:*
  - o *Our business?*
  - o *My own leadership dream and my desired leadership behaviors?*
- *What do I want the people to think about me, if they know I have done this task?*
- *What do I want to think about myself when I have completed the task?*

How do you then define an approach for how to perform the task better? *Concentrate on what will be uncomfortable and challenging.* For example, if the task you’ve chosen is to conduct a meeting, think about the following questions:

- How have I generally performed at meetings recently? What challenges me and makes me feel uncomfortable in meetings?
- How have I performed in this specific type of meeting? What challenges me and makes me feel uncomfortable in this type of meetings?
- What do I need to change or add to how I behave to get close to the desired benefits?

Your learning will increase if you also make a habit of always spending a few minutes writing down what you learned when you did the daily task. Examples of questions you can ask yourself are:

- Did I achieve my desired benefit?
- Did I stick to my behavioral and action approach?
- What did I learn?

I recommend that you pre-plan your daily targets for each day a week in advance. Your mind will work through pre-planned daily targets unconsciously, which means that you actually – with no additional effort – will be better prepared for each of the daily development targets.

Here is a very simple template you can use to describe and evaluate a daily development target for a given day:

Monday	Today's task
The task	
Desired benefits	
Behavioral and action approach with a focus on the uncomfortable aspects	
	After the task:
Did I reach the desired benefits?	
Did I follow my approach?	
What did I learn?	

### The value of selecting a daily development target and evaluating it

I have tested this process with approximately 150 people and the results are very positive and common across the test group:

“Just a few days in working with a daily development target I realized that before I have at most operated on 30 percent of my potential. Most of the things I did were based on habit without much attention to details or actual results. The daily development target makes every day more meaningful and fun.”

Chairman of the Board,  
Financial Services Company

“For some reason I sense that every thing I do during the day becomes more focused. I feel more attentive to what really happens. If the task I have identified as my development target is happening at 1 p.m., I experience that I do most tasks before and after executing my development task much better.”

Chief of Staff,  
Manufacturing Company

In fact, one of the people who tested the daily development target method actually used the method to quit smoking. And to quit smoking might be as challenging as to become an uncomfortable leader. 🤖

Stefan has worked in the space of organizational effectiveness and leadership since 1996. After working at McKinsey, Stefan took on five different senior executive roles at large companies, ranging from Chief Financial Officer to Chief of Staff.

For the last five years, Stefan has worked as a performance and development counselor for executives and middle managers as well as for elite athletes and coaches.

Stefan's book *Neuroleadership: effective leadership based on neuroscience and proven methods*, written with neuroscientist Katarina Gospic was published in Sweden in August 2015.

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