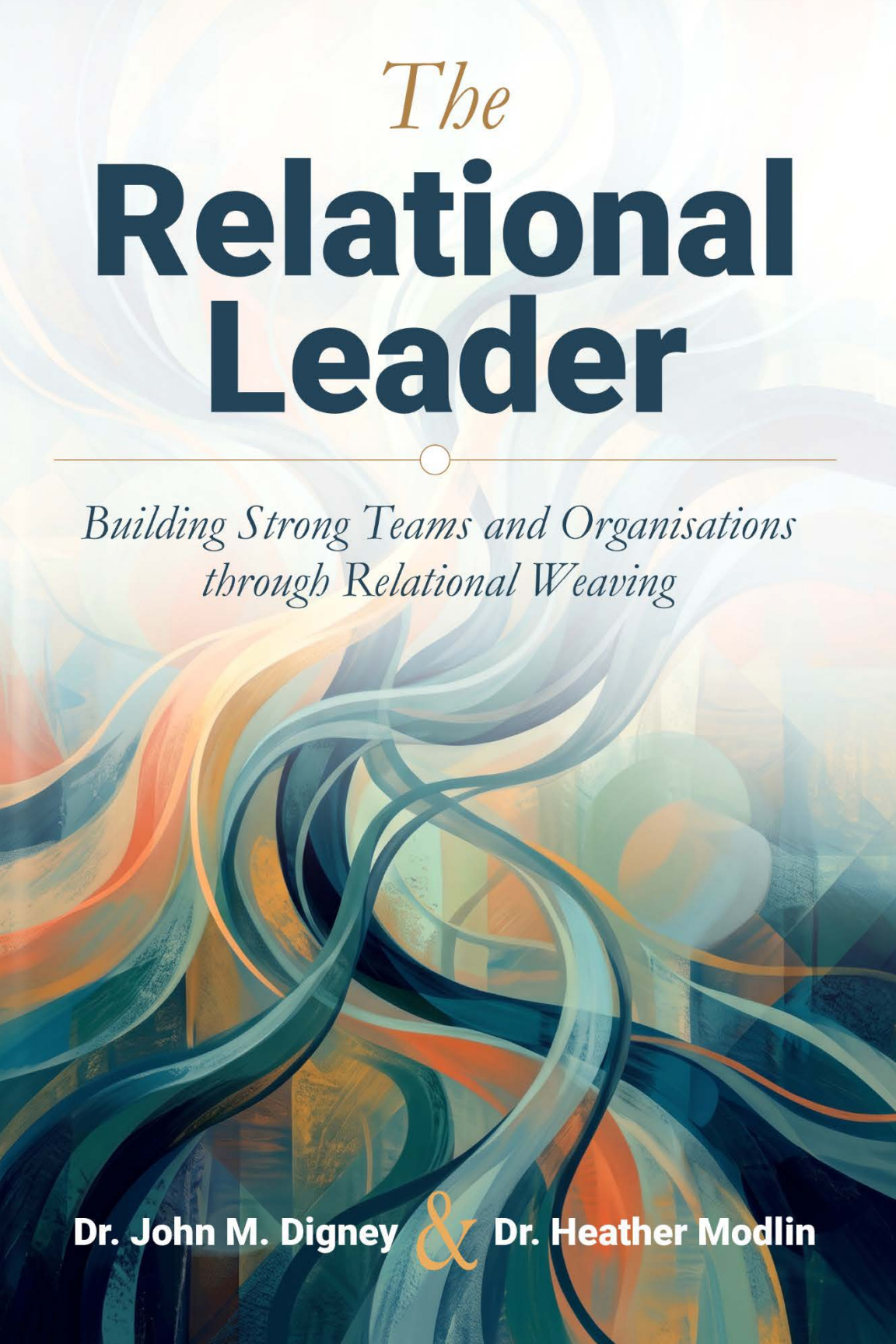
The Relational Leader

Building Strong Teams and Organisations through Relational Weaving



Dr. John M. Digney & Dr. Heather Modlin

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Reflections from Practice

I **LOVE** this book! I love this book so much I want to teach it!

Why do I love this book? I love this book because it is grounded in reality. This book holds stories about real people in real situations who share their wisdom of relational leadership. They have, and continue to, make a real difference. They are weavers who create fabrics that are strong and vibrant.

In essence, this book gives leaders and teams the threads to weave their own uniquely patterned relational fabric. It offers the hope of real change in the way we work and how we encounter each other in the day to day. I hope that all who read this book find it as inspirational as I have, and that, whatever our spheres of influence, we choose to become more relational in our organisations and workplaces. It was a privilege to read and has had a profound impact on me.

Sineag Blane
Area Principal Teacher Learning Support
Uist and Barra, Scotland

***

This text combines the wisdom of over 1,000 years of practice and leadership experience across the 33 contributors, and presents a multitude of profound insights, real-life stories and practical tips. Relational leadership as presented here is personally healing, collectively nourishing and organizationally transformative – an antidote to sources of distress, disintegration and despair. This is a unique and important contribution.

Dr. James P. Anglin
Emeritus Professor, School of Child and Youth Care
University of Victoria, Canada

My understanding of relational leadership has been shaped as much by experiencing its presence as by witnessing its devastating absence. At its best, relational leadership inspired my colleagues and me to innovate, focus on what genuinely mattered for quality, and recognise our collective strengths. It shaped our organisational culture and nurtured a team of leaders who carried these principles into their own programmes. The difference was felt by our clients, valued by staff, and recognised by others in our field.

I have also seen what happens when relational leadership is absent: how this can permeate different levels of leadership and spread across teams, creating toxic environments, eroding staff morale, diminishing the quality of the work, and causing lasting damage to an organisation's culture.

This book captures why relational leadership matters. Leadership is not only about the outcomes achieved, but also about how they are achieved. Relational leaders see the person, not only the performance. They recognise the hurt and pain people may carry, use their power responsibly, protect dignity and wellbeing, and value the strengths, limitations, differences and unique contributions of others. These everyday interactions may appear small, but they profoundly shape organisational culture. When people feel safe, respected and appreciated, they contribute more fully, share ideas more freely, collaborate more effectively and create the conditions for innovation.

Grounded in the Relational Weaving Approach, this thoughtful and practical book offers valuable guidance for leaders across sectors who want to build cultures in which both people and purpose can thrive.

Coenraad de Beer
Strategy, Research and Development Advisor
SOS Children's Villages International, Austria

***

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity and good fortune to meet Dr John Digney, in one of Scotland's rural island areas, famous for its long historical relationship with the weaving of wool into cloth. Whilst it was a relatively short encounter, I did manage to hear John sharing and discussing his life's vast experiences, particularly his international work in safeguarding and leadership. As a retired Police Inspector (30 years in one of Scotland's former legacy police forces & constabularies), my initial thoughts, when being asked to review and write a few words about John's latest book, was "Oh no, not another book on leadership." How wrong was I. Having met John and having heard him speaking about his life's work, my curiosity was aroused. On being asked to review this book, I embarked on what I can only describe as a journey of self-discovery and self-reflection which has made me re-think my own personal and professional values and my understanding of leadership.

Over many years of sitting through endless presentations and lectures on leadership, having been provided with supporting books and handouts – particularly from a hierarchical policing perspective, where command and control, action tasking and coordinating are considered to be king – my eyes have been fully opened as to what is really important for a leader. Seeing beyond. I have often heard leaders saying, as I have previously said myself, leadership can be a lonely, and at times, isolated place to be. Not any longer, if one takes time to read and absorb the wisdom in John and Heather's latest book. The reader is invited to undertake a leadership journey into what many may describe as a very cluttered landscape. The book eases the reader into a very skillful and carefully structured roadmap of discovery. I particularly liked how the conceptual and theoretical models of leadership were described, presented and discussed. Each chapter contained a number of "golden" threads, all supported by case studies, real-life stories, vignettes and very helpful hints and tips for practice. The underlying principles of love, kindness, empathy, respect and understanding were visible and interwoven throughout each chapter contributing to the overall tapestry of the author's leadership wisdom.

Currently working in Scotland's safeguarding and child protection environment, this book has reinforced, in me, the need to review, reflect,

nurture and manage my own relationship-based leadership and practice, which must be evidenced-based, value-based and outcome focused. The "I and me" approach, must be replaced with the "we and us."

This book undoubtedly complements, but does not replicate, or replace, other books on leadership. It promotes the need to be reflective, curious and courageous whilst being kind, empathetic and understanding. Whilst policies, procedures and protocols in safeguarding and child protection are important, it is partnerships, practice and people that keep vulnerable children, young people and families safe. Relational Weaving is undoubtedly the power for effective leadership. Each individual thread in this book is woven throughout the individual chapters and they are strong in their own right. However, when woven together, into a single tapestry, it evidences another more recent cliché of being Stronger Together. Leadership is Relational.

Ross Drummond
Independent Chair, Adult and Child Protection Committees
Outer Hebrides, Scotland

***

Leading Through Relationships offers a compelling reminder that leadership is, at its heart, relational. Building on the framework of relational weaving, the book thoughtfully extends this way of being into leadership. I particularly appreciated its emphasis on creating conditions where people feel safe, valued, and supported, and its recognition that accountability is most effective when approached with respect and care. The stories shared by leaders bring honesty, vulnerability, and hope. Practical guidance is woven throughout, making the ideas applicable across leadership roles and contexts. It provides a thoughtful framework for considering how we lead and the impact our leadership has on those around us.

Dr Jenny McGrath
Associate Professor, Grant-McEwan University
Alberta, Canada

This book offers a compelling vision of relational leadership, rooted in the understanding that meaningful change happens through the intentional "weaving" of relationships. The authors suggest effective leaders create connections between people, and build cultures where trust, belonging and shared responsibility can develop. The stories were perhaps the most effective vehicle for the key messages and doubtless some will lodge themselves in your head. Rather than presenting leadership as authority or expertise alone, the stories present someone who nurtures and strengthens the network of relationships around them. In each chapter the reader can reflect on the benefits of an approach and through practical insights and engaging real-life examples, the book brings this concept to life. It is an inspiring and thought-provoking guide for leaders seeking to create lasting impact through relationships.

As a rule, I'm quite cynical about leadership books, you can often easily remember the concept but not much detail. This book felt different – some of the details are already lodged in my brain, mostly I must admit, thanks to the illustrative real-life examples. I immediately connected with the stories of managers nurturing other managers or spotting when colleagues needed support or a wee bit of levity. As a relatively experienced manager having taken on a new leadership role this book was bang on for reminding me what was important to remember, the benefits of informed intentional approaches and the little things you can do to improve. I've been lucky to have had some great managers, and I recognize them all in this book. The authors have clearly benefited themselves from inspiring leadership and readers will be grateful for this collated wisdom.

Neil Gentleman
Service Manager, Children and Families Social Work
Children's Services, Orkneys

***

Having spent most of my life leading and growing a care organisation in Brazil, the challenge at the heart of this book resonates strongly with me. As organisations professionalise, with pressures, limited resources and increasing demands for measurable outcomes, it is all too easy to lose something of the relational quality that was the driving inspiration in the outset. This book is a timely reminder that relational practice cannot limit itself only to those providing direct care, but must be seem throughout the whole organisation, including its leadership. The authors bring us back to the importance not only of what we do, but of what and how we are with one another and everyone within our organisations. Moments of being present, sharing trust, humour, and caring opportunities are not easily measured or valued as relevant outcomes. Relational leadership can be difficult to define, but you know it when you live it. This is a book I would very much like to see reach leaders well beyond the English-speaking world – including in Portuguese.

Patrick Reason
General Secretary, FICE International
Founder and Executive Director, Grupo ECD
Curitiba, Brazil

Contents

Reflections from Practice ..... **ivv**

Foreword ..... **xiii**

Preface ..... **xviii**

Acknowledgements ..... **xxivv**

Introduction **1**
Weaving Leadership Through Relationships

THE LOOM

1. Leading with Love **11**
The Heart of Relational Leadership

2. "Other-Focused" Leadership **23**
I'm Here for You

3. Optimism in Leadership **34**
Hoping Beyond Hope

4. Managing Change **44**
Guiding Progress in Leadership

THE WARP

5. Wanting to Connect **57**
Leading Through Relationship

6. Active Communication **66**
Leading Beyond Listening

7. Responding to "Needs" **77**
Leading, Not Reacting

8. Promoting Strength-Based Leadership 90
Seeing Their Gifts

THE WEFT

9. Wonderment and Curiosity in Leadership 101
Seeing Before Leading

10. Equality in Relationship 114
Leading Beyond Hierarchy

11. Fun and Humour 123
The Joy in Relational Leadership

12. Trust 135
The Foundation of Relational Leadership

THE SHUTTLE

13. Safety-Orientation 148
Offering Security of Leadership

14. Hurt and Pain Awareness 161
Compassion in Leadership

15. Unconditional Space 172
Leading in The Safe Place

16. Trauma-Informed Leadership 182
Leading in a World Shaped by Experience

17. Transitional Awareness 195
Leading through the Wilderness of Change

18. Leading in the Present 206
Beginning in The Now

19. Engaging Purposefully 217
Leading with Meaning and Direction

THE WEAVER

20. Wisdom in Leadership **228**
Beyond Knowledge

21. Empathy **240**
The Soul of Relational Practice

22. Acceptance in Relational Leadership **252**
Making Room for Difference

23. Vigilance of Self **262**
The Inner Leadership Discipline

24. Exemplifying Integrity **272**
The Conscience of Leadership

25. Reflective and Reflexive Leadership **283**
The Leader in the Mirror

In Conclusion **294**
Relational Weaving in Action

Contributors **297**

Review – A Policing Perspective **304**
Denis Whelan, Former Garda Superintendent

About the Authors **308**

Foreword

There is no shortage of books about leadership. We have theories of leadership, models of leadership, competencies of leadership, assessments of leadership, and programs designed to teach people how to become better leaders. And yet, despite this abundance, many leaders still find themselves facing remarkably familiar problems: disengagement, distrust, conflict, turnover, resistance to change, and the persistent difficulty of getting people to work together well.

Why is that?

One answer is that we have often paid more attention to what leaders do than to how leaders relate.

The Relational Leader: Building Strong Teams and Organisations through Relational Weaving offers a welcome corrective. Its central proposition is both simple and consequential: leadership is fundamentally relational. Leaders do not lead in the abstract. They lead people. Every decision, conversation, performance discussion, conflict, expression of appreciation, and response to difficulty occurs within a relationship. As the authors put it, leaders are constantly weaving relationships, whether consciously or unconsciously. The question is whether they are weaving them well.

What makes this book particularly valuable is that it does not leave this insight at the level of aspiration. One of the great strengths of this book is its practical usefulness. Relational leadership can sound compelling in principle and yet remain frustratingly vague in practice. Most leaders already know that trust matters. They know that empathy matters. They know that communication matters. They know that people want to feel valued and respected.

But knowing that these things matter is not the same as knowing what to do. This book helps close that gap.

The authors organize their approach around twenty-five relational threads, ranging from love, other-focus, optimism, and managing change to communication, responding to needs, curiosity, trust, safety, empathy,

integrity, and reflective practice. These are not presented as isolated competencies but as interconnected threads in a larger relational fabric.

That distinction matters. Leadership is rarely transformed by mastering a single technique. It is shaped by the accumulation of hundreds of small interactions and choices. The strength of the Relational Weaving model is that it gives leaders a language for seeing those choices and a framework for working deliberately on them.

The practical orientation of the book is especially evident in its structure. Each chapter introduces a relational thread, brings it to life through stories from practice, identifies its benefits, and then offers practical suggestions for developing that capacity. The authors are clear that these are not intended as quick fixes or rigid techniques. Rather, they are invitations to reflection and action.

For managers and leaders, that is enormously useful. One can read the book sequentially and develop an overall framework or turn to the particular relational thread that speaks to a current leadership challenge. In either case, the reader is given something that can be taken from the page into the next meeting, the next difficult conversation, the next supervision session, or the next moment when leadership is tested.

But this book is not simply practical. It is also deeply readable. The stories are one of its greatest strengths. Leadership books can sometimes create a peculiar distance between the reader and the subject. We are presented with frameworks, constructs, principles, competencies, and models – and before long, we can find ourselves nodding in agreement while remaining safely detached from the material.

Stories do something different. A good story makes us lean in. Rather than being told what a leader *should* do, we encounter someone confronting an actual human situation: a colleague struggling with circumstances outside of work; a team losing confidence; a difficult organizational transition; a mistake; a moment of courage; an encounter in which a leader chooses curiosity over judgment. We begin to wonder: What would I have done? What would I have noticed? What might I have missed?

That is a very different form of learning. The authors deliberately make the stories the focal point of the chapters because they recognize that

relational leadership is best understood through lived experience. The stories include successes, struggles, and situations containing both, allowing readers to see how relational principles actually unfold in everyday leadership.

And there is another virtue to these stories: they make the relational dimensions of leadership visible. It is easy to say that leaders should demonstrate empathy. It is quite another thing to watch a manager respond to an employee's deteriorating performance by becoming curious about what is happening in that person's life rather than immediately moving into a performance-management conversation. This is why the stories matter. They don't merely illustrate the model. They allow the reader to experience the model.

There is, of course, nothing entirely new about the idea that relationships matter in leadership. Many leadership scholars and practitioners have recognized the importance of trust, empathy, psychological safety, authenticity, servant leadership, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal connection. What is less common is to take the relational perspective and systematically ask: If leadership really is relational, what does that mean leaders actually need to practice?

This is where I believe the Relational Weaving model makes an important contribution. The authors do not simply assert that relationships are important. They identify twenty-five relational threads and show how those threads can be understood, connected, and enacted in leadership practice. That gives the reader something more substantial than another leadership slogan.

The model provides a vocabulary for noticing dimensions of leadership that can otherwise remain invisible. It also provides a way of integrating them. The authors explicitly describe relational leadership not as a competing leadership style but as an integrating philosophy – a lens through which different forms of leadership can be strengthened. Relational leadership does not mean abandoning authority, standards, accountability, performance, or difficult decisions. Indeed, the authors make this point repeatedly. The strongest relational leaders are not passive or indecisive; they can make difficult decisions, establish boundaries, and confront

harmful behavior while preserving dignity. In other words, the choice is not between relationships and results. The deeper proposition is that relationships are part of how results are achieved.

That idea has particular resonance for me. My own work on employee engagement has led me to argue that people do not simply bring their skills and behaviors to work; they bring varying degrees of their physical, cognitive, and emotional selves. Whether people are able and willing to fully bring themselves to their roles depends substantially on the conditions they experience at work. The relational environment is therefore not peripheral to performance. It is part of the context that makes performance possible.

This book takes that insight one important step further. It asks us to consider what leaders themselves do to create – or undermine – the relational conditions in which people can engage, learn, take responsibility, exercise judgment, and grow. The metaphor of weaving is particularly apt. Organizations are not built only through strategies, structures, policies, and plans. They are built through relationships. Culture emerges through thousands of interactions, many of them seemingly insignificant at the time. A leader's response to a question. The tone used in a meeting. Whether someone is listened to. How a mistake is handled. Whether disagreement is welcomed or punished. Whether an employee feels noticed. Whether difficult feedback is delivered with dignity. Each interaction is a thread.

The Relational Weaving model gives leaders a way to become more intentional about those threads. Its final section turns attention toward the *weaver* – the leader themselves – because no relational model can ultimately be separated from the person enacting it.

Wisdom, empathy, acceptance, self-vigilance, integrity, and reflective and reflexive practice all ask the leader to look inward as well as outward. Relational leadership is not something we simply "*do" to* other people. It requires us to examine how we ourselves enter relationships, what we notice and fail to notice, how we respond under pressure, what our authority means to others, and what kind of relational legacy we are creating.

I hope readers will resist the temptation to treat this book as another leadership framework to be mastered and then put aside. Instead, I

encourage them to linger over the stories, recognize themselves in some and perhaps their past leaders in others, experiment with the practices, and return to the relational threads that speak most directly to their own circumstances.

The authors describe the book as an invitation to strengthen the relational thread. I would extend that invitation to every leader and manager who cares about both what an organization accomplishes and how people experience accomplishing it.

In a field crowded with prescriptions about what leaders should do, this book offers something both more fundamental and more practical: a way to think about leadership as the ongoing work of creating relationships in which people – and therefore organizations – can flourish. That is a contribution worth paying attention to.

Dr. William Kahn
Boston University
Questrom School of Business
August 2026

Preface

For quite some time we have been aware of, and regularly discuss, a contradiction at the heart of much contemporary leadership practice in human services. In organisations such as our own, which have a focus on providing welfare and protection services to children, young people and families, especially those whose lives have been marked by trauma, neglect, exclusion, loss, and adversity, we ask our practitioners to be relational, to be attuned, to be emotionally available, to be respectful, to be curious, and to be ever reflective. We encourage them to see behaviour as communication, to understand the meaning beneath the action, and to create environments of safety, belonging, and growth. Yet, all too often the leadership systems surrounding those practitioners are driven by compliance (usually to external standards), distance (both physical and emotional), performance pressure (with measurements against "adverse events" and arbitrary outcome measures), and control. This is common across many sectors and industries.

In today's world, we want (and need) our people to work relationally, yet do not consistently provide the conditions in which this can readily occur. Leadership, in many organizations, is not relational. This book grows out of our conviction that this contradiction is neither inevitable nor sustainable.

Work tasks cannot be cleanly separated from work relationships.
(Kahn, 1990)

Over many years of practice, teaching, managing, organisational development, and leadership across Ireland, Canada and beyond, we have found ourselves returning to a simple but demanding question: *Can the same relational principles that help children heal also help organisations flourish?* Our answer is a resounding "YES," but only if we are willing to take those principles seriously all the way through the system, top to bottom, bottom to top. We are not focused only on management and leadership systems and

practices within our own field; we believe there is utility in this approach within most other leadership systems, be that in human services, industry, retail, construction, manufacturing and other public and private systems. The relational philosophies and approaches developed in child and youth care practice have much applicability to leadership in general.

Relational practice is not reserved for frontline work. It is not a set of tools and skills that can be tacked on to an otherwise transactional culture. It is a way of understanding human beings and the spaces between them. It recognises that people develop, learn, cope, work, and change in relationship. If this is true for children, it is also true for adults, regardless of who they are or where they work. This insight has profound implications for leadership across the board.

Within the child and youth care field, Dr. James Anglin's work on interactional dynamics (2002) has been especially influential in helping practitioners understand that everyday encounters are not neutral events. They are emotionally charged, meaning-filled interactions in which patterns of power, attachment, fear, hope, shame, resistance, and connection are continually being negotiated.

Anglin reminds us that the life space is constituted through relationships and that the quality of interaction can either deepen distress or open possibilities for growth. He also reminded us that such interactional dynamics need to occur across and between ALL levels within an organisation. What happens when we apply this understanding to leadership?

A supervision meeting is an interactional dynamic. A performance conversation is an interactional dynamic. A team meeting, a policy discussion, a crisis response, a disciplinary process, an organisational change initiative, are all (or at least ought to be) relational events. In each encounter, leaders communicate far more than information. They communicate intention, whether people are seen, whether their experience matters, whether uncertainty can be spoken, whether mistakes can be survived, whether disagreement is permitted, and whether dignity will be protected.

We have both witnessed organisations in which staff were trained extensively in trauma-informed and relationship-based approaches, yet felt

unseen, unheard, and psychologically unsafe within their own teams. The result is predictable – people cannot consistently offer the best of themselves when they feel like they are seen and treated only as an object, a little cog in a machine or a piece on a chess board.

We are not suggesting that leaders must become therapists, nor are we inferring that organisations can function without accountability, structure, boundaries, or decision-making authority. In our opinion, relational leadership is not the absence of standards. Leaders do not need to choose between relationship and accountability, but to understand that accountability is most effective when carried within a respectful relationship.

William Kahn's pioneering work on employee engagement at work (1990) offers another important lens for this book. Kahn observed that people bring varying degrees of their physical, cognitive, and emotional selves into their work and deploy or withdraw these depending on whether they experience meaningfulness, safety, and availability. When people feel psychologically safe (when they believe they can express themselves without fear of humiliation or punishment) they are more able to engage fully with their roles. This is not a peripheral issue for people working in any organisation.

Most work requires judgement, emotional regulation, collaboration, and moral courage. Kahn has allowed us to realise that engagement is not merely an individual characteristic; it is relationally and culturally produced.

Throughout this book we argue that relational leadership begins with a shift in perspective, from asking, "How do I get my people to comply and just do their jobs?" to asking, "How do we create the relational conditions for responsibility, learning, and growth that will allow my people be the best they can be?"

In the book we frame our chapters around the various "relational threads" that make up the Relational Weaving approach, described by one of the authors (Digney, 2024). These 25 relational threads emerged from a research project that enquired into the essential elements for relational practice, in working with children, youth and families, but which we have realised are as necessary in relational engagement with adults.

We are from different countries, with our own distinct histories, shaped by different contexts, and yet through our extensive exposure to international

practice settings we are struck by how similar the challenges are across jurisdictions. Whether in residential care, education, youth justice, mental health, child protection, or community services, leaders are navigating increasing complexity: workforce pressures, administrative demands, public scrutiny, resource constraints, and rising levels of need among children and families. In such conditions, relational practice can appear vulnerable, inefficient, or secondary. Our experience suggests the opposite.

When relationships deteriorate, organisations pay the price in turnover, burnout, conflict, absenteeism, reduced creativity, defensive practice, and poorer outcomes. Relational leadership is not a luxury for stable times; it is a stabilising force in unstable times.

Relational leadership is demanding. It asks leaders to pay attention not only to the tasks associate with "getting the job done" and the oversight of other, it also demands that they pay attention to themselves. It requires self-awareness, emotional regulation, humility, and a willingness to examine how one's own history, assumptions, and anxieties all enter leadership interactions. It involves tolerating discomfort, staying curious when criticised, and holding authority without supremacy.

At times, relational leadership will be misunderstood. Some may experience empathy as weakness, reflection as delay, or collaboration as loss of control. Yet the strongest relational leaders we have known are neither passive nor indecisive. They can make difficult decisions while preserving dignity, they can set boundaries without contempt or opposition. They can confront harmful behaviour without reducing the person to the behaviour.

In life, children are supposed to learn about the world (and relationships) from the adults who raise them and who care for them. Staff learn about workplace relationships from the leaders who lead them. And leaders, too, are shaped by the relationships within which they work. Relational leadership is not a programme at the edge of organisational life. It is a paradigm that seeks to weave the threads that connects children, practitioners, supervisors, leaders, and systems. When that thread is strengthened, the whole fabric becomes more resilient.

In writing this book, we have drawn on practice wisdom, research, supervision conversations, leadership development work, and the voices of

many colleagues who have struggled to lead with integrity in complex environments. We are deeply indebted to the traditions of child and youth care, social pedagogy, social work, psychology, attachment-informed practice, trauma-informed care, and reflective supervision that have long recognised the centrality of relationship.

We do not offer this book as a collection of easy answers, or as a "how to" manual. We offer it as a beginning of a conversation to explore how relational practices can enhance the science and art of leadership. In essence, we are playing around with the 25 relational threads to see how they fit with leadership practices and are bringing our friends and colleagues along with us (who so generously agreed to contribute stories from their own leadership experiences).

The stories contained within the chapter are the primary focal point of the book; they bring the relational threads to life and provide a richness that can only come from the vulnerability associated with sharing and reflection.

We know that the 25 relational threads are not a catch all, or complete list of things for leaders to attend to. While we attempted to make each chapter as standalone as possible, to isolate and describe each thread, we know there is overlap within the threads, as is the nature of relationships and relationality. We invite you to join us in the conversation, to offer meaningful critique, thoughtful feedback, and suggestions that could lead to strengthening this initial offering.

Our hope is that this book will speak to leaders who sense that something essential is sometimes lost when organisations become overly procedural; to supervisors who want to support staff without abandoning accountability; to practitioners moving into leadership who do not want to leave their relational values behind; and to organisations seeking cultures that are not only effective, but also humane.

This book is an invitation to strengthen that thread.

Dr. John Digney and Dr. Heather Modlin
Drumcrin, Co. Cavan, Ireland
July 2026

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Acknowledgements

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our friends and colleagues who contributed their experiences and insights through the short stories they shared throughout the chapters. These individuals were selected as contributors because they are skilled and experienced leaders who we respect and admire. Their generosity in sharing their journeys and reflections has greatly enriched the content of this book. We are deeply grateful for their willingness to be part of this collective exploration.

We would like to thank all our previous managers, the good and the bad, we learned something from you all.

We wish to acknowledge Rosarii Mannion who seeded the idea of reconceptualising the Relational Weaving practice approach, within a leadership paradigm.

A big thank you to the people we have worked with over the years, colleagues from the trenches and "found" mentors who taught us what it means to be relational (even if we didn't have the words for it back then).

We dedicate this book to our relational friends who passed away in 2026, all of whom were relational leaders and have contributed to our recent publications: Frank (Frankie D) Delano, Brian Hogan, and Jack Phelan – fallen leadership heroes!

Introduction

Weaving Leadership Through Relationships

May you act not from arrogance
but out of service.
John O'Donohue, Irish author

Leadership is not about a title or a designation.
It is about impact, influence and inspiration.
Robin Sharma, Canadian author and global humanitarian

Leadership has long been studied, debated, measured, and categorised. Libraries and bookcases are filled with books promising the secrets of effective leadership; organisations invest billions in leadership development programmes; and researchers continue to examine the characteristics that distinguish successful leaders from unsuccessful ones. Yet despite this abundance of theory and practice, many organisations continue to struggle with disengaged employees, fractured workplace cultures, high staff turnover, and systems that inadvertently diminish, rather than develop the people within them.

Leadership Models

Throughout the past century, numerous leadership models have emerged, each offering insights into effective leadership:

- **Authoritarian leadership** exists in situations where the leader sets out clear expectations, makes the key decisions, and maintains strict

control over team operations. It is very much a "top-down," task focused approach. It can be effective when quick decisions are required, and some may say that it ensures dependable results and fewer mistakes (within an established hierarchy). This style of leadership can also stifle creativity, reduce collaboration, and increase employee turnover. Over time, it may cause frustration and rebellion, especially when team input is consistently dismissed.

- **Democratic leadership** exists in situations where the leader involves the team in discussions and considers everyone's input before making final decisions. This collaborative approach promotes participation, creativity, and problem-solving while improving morale and job satisfaction. It also helps employees develop decision-making skills useful for future leadership roles. One perceived downside is that such inclusivity and democratic leadership can potentially lead to delays, procrastination, and uncertainty due to extensive discussions. If not managed well, it can lead to a blurring of accountability or create bitterness if some voices dominate. Its success depends largely on the competence and engagement of the leaders and the team members involved.
- **Laissez-faire leadership** gives team members much more freedom to make decisions and manage their work independently. It can encourage innovation, quick decision-making, and personal growth, especially among highly skilled or self-motivated employees. Without extremely clear and ambiguous guidance or accountability, however, teams may experience confusion, isolation, or low morale. Laissez-Faire leadership does not suit everyone, or every workplace, especially those new to groups/teams/organisations who have not yet fully absorbed the objectives, culture and constraints of their role, and who might need some more directive instruction.
- **Situational leadership** emphasizes flexibility, adapting one's style to meet the unique needs and abilities of each team member. Situational leaders assess skill levels, drive, and confidence before deciding whether to be directive, supportive, or hands-off.

Effective situational leaders need to be insightful, identifying when team members need support or autonomy; trustworthy, fostering open communication; problem-convergent thinker, adjusting quickly to challenges; and mentors, guiding employees toward growth. By tailoring their approach, situational leaders create dynamic, motivated teams capable of achieving both individual and organizational growth and goals. This style of leadership is optimized when the leaders are aware of how to gauge employee skill levels, build trust and have exceptional levels of organisational wisdom, curiosity, empathy and reflexivity.

- **Transformational leadership** allows leaders to inspire their teams by setting a compelling vision and encouraging innovation. They motivate individuals to exceed expectations, foster enthusiasm and creativity, and develop strong relationships. This approach often leads to higher morale, lower turnover, and a deep commitment to shared goals.
- **Transactional leadership** is based on a system of rewards and penalties. Leaders set clear goals, monitor performance, and provide incentives for success. This method creates "structure," boosts (robotic) productivity, and ensures that the focus is on the task, as opposed to the interpersonal. It is a type of leadership that "works" when product or making money is the goal. It is not usually effective in human services or caregiving organizations. Transactional leadership limits creativity and long-term innovation, focusing only on short-term results or ticking boxes. Relationships between leaders and subordinates will remain highly superficial, as the approach emphasizes performance over personal development.

Each model contributes something useful to our understanding of leadership but also contains limitations. An authoritarian leader may achieve efficiency while unintentionally suppressing creativity. A democratic leader may encourage inclusion while struggling to maintain decisiveness. Transformational leaders may inspire extraordinary commitment but inadvertently overlook individuals whose needs differ from the collective

vision. Transactional leadership may produce measurable outputs while neglecting the deeper human motivations that sustain long-term engagement.

Leadership can be viewed as an exercise in influence, authority, or performance, with much attention being given to what leaders do, but comparatively less attention paid to how leaders relate. Increasingly, however, there is growing recognition that relationships are not simply one aspect of leadership, they are the very context within which leadership either succeeds or fails. This book begins with a simple proposition: *leadership is fundamentally relational.*

A Relational Perspective

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant evolution in our understanding of relational practice. Originally emerging from child and youth care, social work, education, and other human service professions, relational practice has traditionally focused on the quality of interactions between practitioners and those they support. More recently, however, researchers and practitioners have recognised that the same relational principles extend well beyond frontline work. The qualities that enable meaningful helping relationships are equally relevant to leadership.

This broader understanding has given rise to what we describe as "Relational Leadership," an approach that intentionally integrates relational values into every level of organisational life. Rather than seeing leadership as something exercised over people, relational leadership views leadership as something created with people.

Relational leadership asks leaders to broaden their perspective and encourages them to remain attentive not only to organisational outcomes but also to the quality of human experience that accompanies those outcomes. It reminds us that organisational success is never achieved independently of the people who work within it.

Rather than trying to replace any existing models, relational leadership seeks to enrich them. It is not asking leaders to abandon established leadership approaches. Instead, it invites leaders to weave relational wisdom through whichever leadership style best suits the circumstances. Relational

leadership therefore functions less as another leadership style and more as an integrating philosophy, a relational lens through which all leadership practice can be strengthened.

The central argument of this book is that these same relational approaches that support healing, growth, and development in caring professions also provide the foundations for effective leadership in every organisational context. Increasingly, it is being recognised that the elements of relational practice are relevant at all levels of an organisation, from external stakeholders and managers to supervisors and direct care workers.

Whether leading a multinational corporation, a local enterprise, a community organisation, a school, a hospital, a construction company, or a small project team, leaders work through relationships. Every decision, every conversation, every act of encouragement, every difficult performance discussion, every moment of conflict, and every celebration contribute to the relational fabric of an organisation. Leaders are constantly weaving culture through their interactions, whether consciously or unconsciously. The question, therefore, is not whether leaders are weaving relationships, they inevitably are. The question is whether they are weaving them well.

The metaphor of weaving used in this book reminds us that organisational culture and leadership is never static but instead is continually being constructed through thousands of daily interactions between leaders, colleagues, teams, and communities, meaning that leadership is not merely strategic – it is profoundly relational craftsmanship. Exceptional leaders become intentional weavers who understand that every conversation matters, that every interaction contributes to the organisational tapestry.

Relational Weaving

To help readers navigate the journey ahead, as noted in the Preface, this book has been intentionally structured around "Relational Threads" identified in the Relational Weaving model. These are twenty-five interconnected relational necessities that together help create the conditions for authentic human connection and helping. These threads are

not isolated competencies nor are they personality traits. Instead, like individual fibres woven into a tapestry, they gain their strength through their interconnectedness. Remove one thread and the beauty and integrity of the whole begins to weaken. Strengthen the weave, however, and relationships become more resilient, more adaptive, and more capable of supporting growth.

Each chapter focuses on one thread and briefly explores how it contributes to effective relational leadership in practice. While every thread is distinct, they are not designed to stand alone. Like strands woven together into a strong and purposeful fabric, each chapter connects to the others, gradually revealing a more complete picture of leadership grounded in relationships, human dignity, and meaningful influence.

The 25 chapters are additionally organised around five broad categories that reflect the structure of the Relational Weaving model: The Loom, The Warp, The Weft, The Shuttle, and The Weaver. These categories are not merely labels; they represent different functions within relational practice.

The book begins with The Loom, Chapters 1-4; these can be viewed as the foundational framework upon which everything else depends. In weaving, the loom holds the entire process together; in relational leadership, these threads shape the leader's overarching orientation to people and change. The four chapters in this section explore Love, Other Focus, Optimism, and Managing Change. These are the assumptions and commitments that determine how leaders see others, how they interpret challenges, and how they create environments in which relationships can flourish.

The second set of topics, Chapters 5-8, focuses on The Warp. These are the supporting threads that provide structure, stability, and integrity. Without them the fabric cannot hold. In relational leadership, the warp represents the core functions that must remain steady if practice is to be effective. The chapters examine Wanting to Connect, Active Communication, Responding to Needs, and Promoting Strengths. Together, they explore the disciplined relational habits that allow leaders to build genuine connection and sustain it over time.

The third set of topics, chapters 9-12, turns to The Weft, the threads that are woven through the structure to bring strength, texture, and usefulness to the emerging fabric. Here the focus is on what leaders intentionally bring into the lives of others through their daily interactions. The four chapters explore Wonderment and Curiosity, Equity in Relationship, Fun and Humour, and Trustworthiness. These threads remind us that relational leadership is not only about competence and structure; it is also about creating relationships that are life-giving, respectful, engaging, and safe.

The penultimate grouping, chapters 13-19, explores The Shuttle, how the weaving is carried out. In traditional weaving, the shuttle carries the weft through the warp; in relational leadership, it represents the methods, tools, and approaches leaders use in their work. This section contains six chapters: Safety Oriented, Hurt and Pain Awareness, Unconditional Spaces, Trauma Informed, Transitionally Aware, Leading in the Present, and Engaging Purposefully. These chapters are especially practical, focusing on how leaders create conditions that support connection, growth, participation, change and purposeful engagement.

The final set of topics, chapters 20-25, centres on The Weaver – the leaders themselves. No matter how strong the framework or how effective the tools, relational leadership ultimately depends on the character, awareness, and skill of the person doing the weaving. The six chapters in this section explore the leader traits of: Wisdom, Empathy, Acceptance, Self-Vigilance, Exemplifying Integrity, Reflective and Reflexive Practice. These chapters invite leaders to consider not only what they do, but who they are becoming as they lead.

Chapter Structure

Although the themes differ and are a subjective way of grouping the various threads, every chapter follows the same consistent structure so that readers can engage with the material in a practical and reflective way.

Each chapter opens with a short introduction to the relational thread. This section explains our definition of the thread, its place within the Relational Weaving model, and why it matters for leadership. The intention

is not to provide an abstract theory alone, but to offer a clear and accessible doorway into the topic.

Each introduction is then followed by three stories from practice. These stories are drawn from the real-world leadership contexts of many friends and colleagues, which are included because relational leadership is best understood through lived experience. Some stories illustrate success, others struggle, and many contain elements of both. Their purpose is to show how the thread appears in everyday leadership situations – within teams, organisations, services, communities, and moments of engagement. These stories bring the concepts of relational leadership to life in ways we could not otherwise achieve. Readers are encouraged to look beyond the specific setting of each story and reflect on the relational dynamics that may be present in their own context.

After the stories, each chapter presents five key benefits associated with the thread. These benefits highlight the positive outcomes that tend to emerge when the thread is intentionally developed and consistently practised. In some chapters the benefits relate to trust, belonging, and psychological safety; in others they relate to collaboration, resilience, growth, or ethical leadership. This section is designed to help readers connect relational practice with tangible impact.

Each chapter concludes with practical tips for improvement. These are not presented as rigid techniques or quick fixes. Rather, they are small, actionable suggestions that can help leaders strengthen the particular "relational capacity" explored in the chapter. Some tips focus on self-awareness, some on communication, some on team culture, and others on reflective practice. Some tips are drawn from material presented in the stories. The aim is to support ongoing leadership development in manageable chunks.

This repeated pattern – introduction, stories, benefits, and practical tips – is deliberate. Relational leadership is not learned through concepts alone, nor through stories alone, nor through advice alone. It is learned through the integration of understanding, experience, reflection, and action. By keeping this structure consistent across all 25 chapters, the book allows

readers to compare threads, identify patterns, and gradually weave their own relational leadership framework.

You may choose to read the book from beginning to end, following the logic of the model from foundation to practice to personal leadership. Alternatively, you may begin with the thread that most resonates with your current challenges or aspirations. The chapters are designed to stand independently, but they are also designed to enrich one another.

Taken together, these 25 chapters form more than a collection of leadership ideas. They offer a map for leaders who want to weave stronger relationships, healthier cultures, and more humane forms of influence – one relational thread at a time. Every leader leaves a relational legacy. Some leave organisations characterised by fear, compliance, and fragmentation, others leave organisations marked by trust, courage, compassion, accountability, and hope. The difference lies not only in what they accomplished but in how they wove relationships throughout their leadership.

The Relational Weaving Model offers both a language and a practical framework for understanding this process. It provides leaders with an opportunity to move beyond viewing relationships as merely supportive of leadership and instead recognise them as leadership itself. Ultimately, relational leadership is an invitation to lead with wisdom rather than ego, with curiosity rather than certainty, with integrity rather than status, and with service rather than power.

THE LOOM

1. Leading with Love

The Heart of Relational Leadership

The thing about love is that we come alive in bodies not our own.
Colum McCann, Irish novelist

Love is where leadership begins.
Glenn C. Stewart, pastor and author

The idea of love in leadership may feel strange and uncomfortable for some of us, for various reasons, including the perspective that in professional environments the word "love" seems out of place, overly sentimental, or even naïve. Some of this discomfort can stem from the social and cultural meanings attached to the word. Previously (Modlin & Digney, 2025) we suggested that "Love is a difficult word and concept to explain, made even more complicated by the ways in which we have experienced love in our own lives and how this has been shaped by familial, societal and cultural norms and expectations" (p. 60). Because people associate love primarily with romantic or familial relationships, its relevance within the realm of the workplace is often overlooked or misunderstood.

When we begin to strip away these layers, love can become far less mysterious. At its core, love, in the context we are using it, simply means holding a deep, genuine positive regard for others and actively wishing the best for their growth and well-being. Love can be expressed through empathy, respect, care, and service. It is less about emotion and more about intentional action. Love is not about indulgence, permissiveness, or avoiding difficult conversations. Within a leadership dimension, it is about leading with humanity, while maintaining accountability. Leaders who act from love do not ignore standards or responsibilities; instead, they address them with fairness, compassion, and integrity.

In contrast, leadership driven by fear or emotional distance often aims for compliance rather than commitment and may rely on control, hierarchy, and positional authority. This may achieve short-term results (however these are measured) but it rarely inspires trust or creativity. Lalonde (2022) highlighted the work of Joe Ricciardi, who explored the impact of love within leadership relationships and found that team members who feel loved by their leaders are significantly more likely to perceive those leaders as effective and trustworthy. Ricciardi identified several relational elements common among highly effective leaders:

- Closeness
- Devotion
- Intimacy (in the sense of deep understanding)
- Authentic connection

These leaders cultivate relationships where people feel seen, respected, and supported, and in such environments, individuals feel safe enough to grow, innovate, and contribute meaningfully. Leadership grounded in love is more than a personal style, it is a relational practice that can shape an organization's culture.

To understand the transformative potential of love in leadership, it is helpful to explore lived experiences. The following three stories illustrate how "love-based" leadership unfolds in real workplaces.

John's Story – You Matter Here

Early in my career in residential care, I worked a varied shift pattern and, as in many residential environments, the atmosphere could shift quickly, so even on a quiet evening there was always a sense of vigilance in the background. We worked with kids who carried emotional wounds, who could behave in unpredictable ways and who needed caring staff, adults who were able to remain calm, patient, and consistent in any situation. Looking back, I've come to realise that maintaining this calmness didn't aways come easy, but if you stayed in the job long enough and had enough support and mentoring, you could develop strategies that were helpful in

regulating yourself. You learned ways to "absorb" tension without reacting, and developed skills in maintaining composure, even when emotions were running high.

One of my colleagues from back then, Peter (not his real name), had mastered such skills. He was slightly older and more experienced than many of us and the kids respected him. He was the kind of worker often described as firm but fair, fun, calm, steady, and grounded.

One evening during supper the kids were unusually loud, they were teasing each other, pushing boundaries in the way kids often do when they feel safe enough to test limits. Normally Peter handled these situations effortlessly but that night the noise seemed to grate on him. Suddenly he snapped, "For Christ's sake, can you lot not behave yourselves for five minutes?"

Before anyone could respond, Peter climbed out of the bench seat that he had been sitting on and stormed out of the room, muttering loudly. We heard a door slam behind him as he disappeared down the bedroom corridor. Mick, our unit manager, had been in the office reading through logbooks and daily reports and obviously heard the raised voice and the slamming door.

Given the focus on the adults to role model and maintain certain behavioural standards, situations like this could easily be treated as disciplinary matters, but Mick did something else.

He stepped out of the office and asked us if we were okay covering the floor without Peter for a while. We said we were and he then went toward the staff sleep-over area where Peter had gone. With some curiosity (and of course, concern) I stepped out of the living room and listened from the hallway. Peter had come back out of the staff sleep-over area and was now standing outside one of the kid's bedrooms, looking tense and shaken. Mick stood beside him and I heard him say, in a voice that was calm and gentle, "But what's really going on, mate … you know I'm always here for you." I went back into the living area.

Most of us already knew Peter had been going through a painful separation, was couch-surfing, and was barely seeing his children. He was

trying to hold everything together while continuing to work full-time supporting vulnerable young people.

After shift we all left the centre and went to our usual spot to hangout and "debrief the shift." It was here that Peter told us what happened next with Mick. He started by say that Mick hadn't lectured him and didn't get into referencing policy or professionalism. Instead, Mick had placed a hand on Peter's shoulder and said, "You're not alone in this. We'll get through it together." He described the moment as not patronising but almost fatherly and protective.

Over the following weeks we were all aware of how Mick regularly checked in with Peter, often informally. Sometimes he arranged to work the same shifts, even when he wasn't scheduled. When the kids were settled, he would invite Peter for a short walk around the campus. These moments were never dramatic or performative but were genuine quiet (almost invisible) acts of care. Peter said how he was appreciative of how Mick reminded him of his strengths and reaffirmed his value to the team. What struck me most was that Mick never made a public show of helping him, it was simply how he led.

A few months later I mentioned to Mick how impressed I was by the way he handled the situation. Mick shrugged and replied, "If you don't love your staff and let them know you do, what's the point in even coming to work?" The "L-word" used this way was new to me.

In many professional environments we purposefully avoid the word, but Mick used it naturally and as importantly, he embodied it. Watching that situation unfold over a few weeks taught me an important lesson – genuine care strengthens not only individuals but entire teams. As we all witnessed Mick's approach to support Peter, we became more aware how his response created a sense of psychological safety for the whole team. We knew that if we struggled, we needn't worry that we would be judged by Mick, but instead we were more likely to be supported because we had a sense that we would be made to feel, "you matter here."

Zeni's Story – The Ripple Effect of Love in Leadership

I was a 25-year-old Social Worker when I met Sabitha in a children's home that I worked at (and remained working at for 10 years thereafter). She was a senior child and youth care worker managing a team of staff who went on to teach me the magic of child and youth care practice just through role modeling it, consistently and with integrity. I observed her interaction with children, with staff and with the broader team of workers. I could see the child and youth care theory I had read about came alive in her practice. So, I followed my destiny and became a child and youth care worker too! Sabitha inspired me on a very long and happy professional journey.

Sabitha was one of the most caring and generous people I have ever had the pleasure of encountering. Her leadership was non-judgmental and respectful. She was caring and kind to all, she approached every day with a positive attitude that evoked hopefulness and collaboration. Her early morning visits to the child and youth care workers in their cottages allowed them to debrief and talk informally with her. They welcomed this time of personal connection over a cup of coffee. She was positive and strength-based, noticing strengths in all her interactions with the diverse layers of staff at the children's home.

At staff meetings, team meetings and even at board meetings she would share these observations, casually and powerfully leaving everybody feeling seen, heard and affirmed. In this way the team spirit at our children's home was outstanding at all levels, and the children experienced an environment of trust and collaboration. I noticed repeated, careful explanations to the maintenance staff who were impatient about another broken window to fix; I noticed the advocacy to the board of management for the recommended quality of kitchen equipment to buy; I saw child and youth care workers crying on her shoulder with their personal challenges. Under her guidance workers attended family funerals of each other and the children, compassionately supporting those in grief.

Sabitha understood that building confidence meant helping workers see their potential and capacity and, in this regard, she supported their study, encouraged them when they were doubtful and celebrated with them both small and big achievements. She was always hopeful and helpful, and she

was kind, someone who would walk the extra mile for the team, ensuring that little requests were heard, understood and fulfilled, such as supporting Dolly who required her special plants to be moved when she was transferred to work in another cottage; like supporting Nazil who was afraid to cook with gas when the electricity went off; like helping Molly adjust to working in a "traditionally dominant" cultural environment; like ensuring that kindness and cultural competence was understood by all staff as a non-negotiable transformative goal of the children's home.

Sabitha was a great supporter of Henry Maier and understood, to paraphrase Henry, that care has not only to be delivered but to be *experienced* as caring. In caring for the team individually and in a group, she was careful that they experienced her caring and love, and in this way, she helped the workers understand how important it was that children need to *experience* their caring and love.

Loving kindness provided to the diverse levels of workers in a broad staff team does indeed create a therapeutic milieu. In this kind of environment children can thrive and find consistency in all the adults around them. It is important not to forget to include the cleaner, the gardener, the administrative office worker and the board member as they too need time to understand, debrief and demonstrate consistently their role as adults in the lives of the children. In developing effective workers holistically, they need to experience caring, empathy, respect, recognition and hope. This contributes to their confidence and courage. Under Sabitha's mentorship workers felt competent and were inspired and supported to study. Four of these workers advanced to becoming principals of four different children's homes, taking their practice into leadership positions elsewhere. Over time we could see how "good leaders" produce good leaders! There is truth in the "ripple effect."

If a leader can demonstrate consistent, loving caring in their positions, others will both experience and be inspired to emulate this. And if others follow this example, they can create a culture of caring and a therapeutic milieu (which we owe to those in our care). Although there are various teams within the broader staff team, they are nevertheless all adults in the life of those we care for and about, who can have influence. When adults

experience love, caring, empathy, attention and positive feedback themselves, they will better understand what is expected of them to create a therapeutic environment for others.

Steve's Story – Injecting Love Back into the Organisation

"I can't see a way through," said the boy.
"Can you see your next step?" asked the horse.
"Yes."
"Just take that."

This little quote from "The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse" by Charlie Mackesy captured the sentiment of the team that I had started working with, and I thought it appropriate to share this quote with them. The last couple of years had been tough for them, and they had been trying their best to stay afloat, but their "prognosis" had been looking increasingly precarious, being only weeks away from having to close the doors and transition the children and young people in their care out of their service. Their confidence and hopes for the future were in serious jeopardy, and they were clinging onto the little they did have to get them through.

A last-minute proposal was put in place to try and get things back on track and the focus on survival was in full swing. At this point, with the implementation of the proposal, all they were doing was taking the next step. The more I got to know the team, the more I could see and understand the trauma they had been through and how this was impacting their belief in getting beyond surviving. Their entire attention, as professionals, had been on meeting the needs of the children and young people in their care. But who was caring for them? They were deflated and some would say nearly defeated.

My approach was simple, we needed to "inject love back in the place." For me, love is all encompassing, not just a feeling or a sentiment; it is an action and in this instance love actions were critical. I made time to sit and listen, to understand what had happened, to not diminish those experiences but to offer hope and an attempt to lift people's chins a bit higher so that

they could start to see in front of themselves and the opportunities that lay ahead.

This wasn't always easy to do when their contract had been taken away from them and there was no guarantee of a future. My focus was to get them believing that we had one. We had a contract to win, and we would throw all our energy and efforts into making this happen. Getting the contract would put more certainty in the future and I was confident it would play a big role in getting their confidence back. I knew that being affirmed, experiencing care, being encouraged and having someone tell you that they believed in you, all expressions of love, go a long way to elevating someone and helping them get their mojo back. In fact, four years on, these colleagues tell me that during that time, they felt like our approach and actions had carried them and this is what they had needed. In tandem with the work on the contract, we started to change things up a little. I wanted people in the organisation to be seen and to feel valued. I think this was something that had been seriously missing and I've no doubt had an eroding effect on morale.

I introduced practices that included celebrating milestone birthdays and anniversaries and capturing moments of achievement. We put effort into reinvigorating employee networking initiatives and forums, and for the first time ever in the history of the organisation, we brought children together from across the different houses to mix, socialise and learn from each other. This became the platform for work focused on children and young people's participation within the life of the organisation.

Connecting people together was such an important part of injecting love back into the place and it was working. We started to talk about both the "employee experience" and the "employee offer" as interconnected, and that a key component of this was about how this made people feel. We wanted our employees to feel valued, seen, heard … and loved.

Within 12 weeks we got news that we had been re-awarded the contract. All that effort and work had paid off and now, once again, the future looked bright. Amongst the relief and celebration, we still had work to do. One of the things that I had seen was that when an organisation is down "in the

valley," so to speak, this is an ideal breeding ground for suspicion and negative thinking, and we needed to get people back on the "mountain top."

Now that we had a future we needed to build on all the things that we had been working on and show that it was tangible. I said to the leadership team that there was no better way to do this than to "positively love smatter" everyone. We took a road trip around the country, visiting every house and as many of the workforce as we could. We brought cakes, positive messaging and listening ears, and it worked. Word was getting around that these visits were having a positive effect and there was a collective move forward happening, the mood was changing as people were "feeling the love." This needed to become a regular activity. I'm reminded that when people, or organisations, feel under attack or like everything is going wrong it's so easy to go into siege or develop a siege mindset. Bringing people out of that state only happens when they feel safe to come out of the trenches. When the leaders felt loved and safe, the staff could feel loved and safe too and, in that context, you can always take risks and see a way through – and see a way through they did.

I've always believed, throughout my social work career, that when people feel loved and held that this can be a springboard for them to realise their full potential, as it brings security and a knowledge that however things are, someone has "got my back." Love, as a feeling or expression of care, is not exclusively held within the realms of romantic relationships, friendships or kin but can and does extend to all aspects of human interaction and relationships, including professional ones. I have seen the power of this firsthand – holding people in positive regard is a form of expressing love. Love is kindness, it is care, it is encouragement, it is healing and it is motivational.

I would suggest that we use love and show love more than we realise and I know that for me it has informed my approach in leadership for many years. Our work is all about positive and meaningful relationship, and love is foundational.

The Benefits of Love in Leadership

These stories demonstrate that love in leadership is not theoretical or abstract. It is practical, visible, and powerful. Leaders who lead with love create workplaces characterised by such benefits as:

1. **Authentic connections –** Real, genuine engagement between individuals at all levels of the organization is more likely to occur when employees feel loved. This starts with love-based leadership.
2. **Caring and compassionate work environments –** When leaders demonstrate love and care consistently, those behaviours spread throughout the organisation.
3. **Higher retention** – People are more likely to remain in organisations where they feel seen, respected, appreciated and loved.
4. **Improved well-being** – Supportive and loving leadership reduces stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion.
5. **Greater engagement** – Employees are more committed when they feel valued as human beings rather than merely as workers.

Practical Tips for Building Love in Relational Leadership

Love-based leadership is not about grand gestures but instead is built through consistent, intentional practices. Here are some suggestions for ways that leaders can cultivate love within their leadership approach:

1. **See the whole person** – Employees are not just staff; they are individuals with families, with challenges, with aspirations. Taking time to understand people's lives beyond work strengthens relationships. Simple questions like "How are things at home?" can communicate genuine care.
2. **Recognise and celebrate contributions** – Acknowledging achievements reinforces a sense of value and belonging. Recognition does not need to be formal. A thank-you message or a public acknowledgement in a meeting can be powerful.

3. **Encourage growth** – Love in leadership involves wanting the best for others. Leaders should support professional development, mentorship, and opportunities for learning. Helping someone reach their potential is a profound expression of genuine caring and love.
4. **Listen deeply** – Active listening is one of the most powerful expressions of respect. Leaders should listen without interrupting, judging, or immediately offering solutions. Sometimes people simply need to be heard.
5. **Be present during difficult moments** – Moments of struggle often reveal the true character of leadership. When employees face personal or professional challenges, compassionate leaders show up with support rather than judgement.
6. **Model kindness** – Culture often reflects leadership behaviour. When leaders demonstrate kindness, respect, and empathy, those behaviours become normative across the organisation.

Love as a Foundation of Leadership

Relational leadership recognises that organisations are fundamentally networks of human relationship and when leaders approach those relationships with love (expressed in ways that attend to care, respect, and commitment to others' growth), amazing things become possible. Within the context of love in leadership, we still need to maintain compassionate accountability. Love-based leadership does not avoid difficult conversations. Instead, it approaches accountability with fairness and empathy, ensuring standards are upheld while preserving dignity. Leaders who lead with love create environments where individuals feel safe, valued, and inspired in tough time as well as the good times.

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In Conclusion

Relational Weaving in Action

Engagement thrives in the context of some relationships and wilts in others ...
relationships are metaphorically, the nervous system of the organization ...
William Kahn, organizational psychologist and
'Founding Father' of employee engagement

In the introduction we invited readers to join us on a journey; a journey to explore leadership through the lens of relationship. Specifically, we used the 25 interconnected threads of the Relational Weaving framework to illustrate the ways in which leadership is fundamentally relational.

The power of this book lies in the stories, which clearly portray that leadership is relationally co-created with the people we serve. Through examples of successful relational engagement, and cautionary tales of "what not to do," the stories demonstrate that organizational success cannot be separated from the quality of human experience within the organization.

While each chapter focuses on a specific thread, these threads weave together to make an integrative whole. Through the metaphor of weaving, we see how each interaction contributes a strand to the organizational fabric. The 25 relational threads provide a practical language for developing this capacity; from love, connection, communication, and trust, to safety, empathy, integrity, and reflexive practice. Ultimately, the application of relational weaving invites leaders to move beyond viewing relationships as something that supports leadership and instead recognize that relationships are the fabric of leadership.

Benefits of Relational Leadership

In each chapter, we presented five benefits of engaging relationally through the specific thread highlighted in that chapter. Although we sought to distinguish these benefits as clearly as possible and minimize redundancy, the threads themselves are interwoven, and so, inevitably, are the benefits. Relational leadership, in general, has the potential to positively impact organizational functioning in many ways, and can contribute to the following benefits:

1. Creates a **psychologically safe** environment where people are more willing to learn and grow.
2. Builds **resilience** by recognising strengths such as persistence, care and commitment, particularly during mistakes, setbacks or conflict.
3. Encourages greater **innovation**, as people are more willing to share ideas when their expertise is appreciated.
4. Improves employee **wellbeing and retention** by demonstrating genuine care for people's development and capacity.
5. Improves **motivation** by recognising, acknowledging and reinforcing individual contributions.
6. Increases **employee engagement** by helping people feel valued for what they do well.
7. Reduces the risk of **burnout** by providing emotional and psychological containment for employees who are managing significant interpersonal demands in the workplace.
8. Strengthens **collaboration** by enabling team members to contribute from their areas of greatest capability.
9. Increases **staff accountability** by making people feel trusted, respected and significant, encouraging more responsible and taking greater ownership of their work without constant supervision.
10. Allows for **leader accountability** become systemic by recognising influence on outcomes rather than attributing challenges solely to others.

Fundamentally, this book is about people. About humanity. About recognizing and remembering that leadership is not sterile. It does not exist in a vacuum. Leadership is about connection; it exists in the interpersonal space between individuals. If the organization is the tapestry, relational weaving provides a framework through which we pull together the connective threads. Together, we strengthen the weave.

Contributors

In alphabetical order …

Dr. Paul Baker (USA and Australia) was trained as a Neuropsychologist and has over 30 years experiences in leadership, overseeing mental health services, as CEO, COO, National Director and Director. He believes that a relational and flexible approach is critical to establishing a therapeutic and meaningful relationship with clients and his staff.

Dr. Howard Bath (Australia) has worked in a variety of roles in child welfare and youth justice. After training in clinical psychology, he worked as an Agency Director and then as Children's Commissioner for Australia's Northern Territory. He currently provides consultancy and training services and is lead author of the book: 'The Three Pillars of Transforming Care.'

Dr. Ashleigh Best (Ireland and Scotland) is a psychotherapist with over 20 years of experience working with children, families, and professional teams. She is currently a senior leader in children's services. Her work is grounded in relational practice, attachment. She is passionate about creating and leading in environments where children and young people can experience connection, belonging, and opportunities.

Dr. Michelle Briegel (Canada) is an Associate Professor of Child and Youth Care at Mount Royal University with over 30 years of experience in child and youth care. She has held leadership roles in residential care, higher education, and professional associations. Michelle is passionate about relational leadership and supports organizations in strengthening workforce sustainability, supervision, and staff retention.

Caroline Cronly (Ireland) is the Regional Manager for Workforce Learning and Development in Tusla Child and Family Agency and has worked in the Child and Family Service for over 35 years. 18 of these in various management roles, in residential care, and in HR. Caroline is a licenced Coach in Advanced Coaching with Neuroscience.

Frank Delano (USA) was the owner of Professional Package Consulting, located in New York, though spent significant time sharing his knowledge all over the globe. He had a long career in residential care for children, presented at numerous conferences and contributed substantially to the field in terms of practice, leadership, coaching and consulting.

Mark Freado (USA) has 50 years of experience in leadership positions in various non-profit services. He provides training and consultation services to public and private child and family serving organizations throughout the world. He is an author of a book and numerous articles in the field. He remains a teacher-counselor.

Dr. Leon Fulcher (New Zealand and USA), MSW is a Professor of Social Work (Retired) with more than forty years professional leadership experience in the child and youth care field – in N. America and Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and the Asia-Pacific region: as a practitioner, manager, educator, researcher, and scholar. He Chaired the Board of Governors for *The International Child and Youth Care Network* at www.cyc-net.org for a decade.

Shay (Sé) Fulham (Ireland) is an experienced social care leader with over 40 years of working alongside children, young people, and families. His relationship-based approach has guided his leadership of a family support service in Co. Meath for 20 years, quadrupling its impact while championing innovation and inclusion for marginalised families.

Dr. Thom Garfat, CM (Canada) is a Member of the Order of Canada since 2023, has worked in CYC for over 50 years, with most of that time being in leadership positions. He is Co-founder of the International Child & Youth Care Net, and Relational Child & Youth Care Practice, Thom also developed the international training, The Purposeful Use of Daily Life Events.

Lesley Goodyear (Canada) has worked for 20 plus years within a variety of settings including group care, family support, residential treatment, and even providing family-based care in her own home. She is currently the Director of Relational Practice with Amal and has held formal leadership roles since 2012. She is known for her inspired enthusiasm for adult development and growth culture practice.

K. Larisa Hanssen (Canada) is co-coordinator of the Youth Justice Diploma program and an instructor in the Child and Youth Care program at Douglas College, Canada. She also collaborates with health authorities and community organizations on project development, staff training, and program evaluation, drawing on 25 years of practice and leadership experiences in Canada and Australia.

Dr. Emmie Henderson Dekort (Canada) is an Assistant Professor in the Child Studies program at Mount Royal University. Emmie is a passionate advocate for child and youth rights and participation. Her work focuses on supporting meaningful engagement and promoting research that enhances the voices and experiences of young people.

Brian Hogan (Ireland) was Director of Relationships at Work, with over 36 years of experience in secure residential care. He held senior management roles for 20 years, including five years as CEO. Brian also served on several boards. His most recent work centred on leadership development, mentoring, and supporting emerging leaders. He was passionate about relational practice.

Heidi Holloway (Canada) has more than a decade of experience leading complex, multidisciplinary youth-service teams across CYCP milieus in Nova Scotia, Canada. She integrates trauma-informed care, relational approaches, and reflective practice to cultivate psychologically safe, growth-oriented environments where professionals feel supported, valued, and empowered to provide exceptional and compassionate care to young people and their communities.

Eva Ihasz (Hungary) is a qualified social worker and psychologist, she was network leader of the SOS Children's Villages foster care network in Battonya and Orosháza during major organisational change at SOS Children's Villages Hungary, aimed at ensuring the organisation's long-term sustainability. She has worked in various care settings and has facilitated Trauma-Informed Care for practitioner's and volunteers.

Steve Jacques (UK and Ireland) is an award-winning senior executive and registered social worker. Former Group CEO of Key Assets Group, Founding Director of Fostering First Ireland, and Executive Chairperson of Odyssey Social Care, Steve has extensive international leadership experience driving strategic growth, organisational transformation, governance, and lasting social impact across child-centred organisations.

Dr. Stacy Kelsey (USA) is a psychologist, coach/consultant, international trainer, and founder of Brainworks Pediatric Group. She specializes in helping parents, educators, and youth-care leaders understand how relationships guide a child's development of mind, emotions, and behaviors. She has led professional teams in public education, alternative education, and youth and parent programs around the world.

Karen Mighty (Canada) is an equity, diversity, inclusion, anti-racism (EDIAR) consultant with over 20 years of leadership experience in children's mental health, Intensive Live in treatment and social services. Her work centres on improving equity and access, trauma-informed approaches,

embedding cultural humility and anti-oppressive principles into social policy and daily service delivery.

Caroline Moore (Canada) has worked at HomeBridge Youth Society in Nova Scotia, Canada for the last 25 years. Caroline worked as a Youth Care Worker and Supervisor and is currently the Director of Youth Care Services. Caroline's interests lie in the concepts of CYC-supervision and development.

Michelle Perchard (Canada) has 14 years of experience in Child and Youth Care field and holds a Master's. With 12 years of experience in leadership, Michelle is Manager of Out of Home Care with Amal Youth and Family Centre. She is passionate about relational practice, supporting the growth of Child and Youth Care workers, and strengthening understanding and respect for the profession.

David Power (Ireland) has extensive experience in social care having been active in the field for over 38 years. He was formerly President of the Irish Association of Social Care Workers and a founding member of Social Care Ireland. David joined Smyly Trust Services in 2014 as Director of Services. David is committed to ensuring a quality service through quality leadership.

Jody Rhodes (USA) is the executive director of Neu-Life Community Development, a nonprofit providing educational, recreational, and workforce development programming for Milwaukee's youth. Jody has more than 30 years of experience working with youth and families and has extensive experience with program development, best practices, fund development, and staff development.

Okpara Rice (USA) is Chief Executive Officer of Tanager, a leading children's behavioural health organization in Iowa. With more than two decades of executive leadership, he is a recognized expert in nonprofit leadership, child welfare, community collaboration, and systems change. Okpara also serves as an adjunct professor at the University of Iowa.

Dr. Kelly Shaw (Canada) has worked with children, youth, and families for over 30 years in direct practice, supervision, leadership, and post-secondary education. She is a past President of the CCCYCA, has served on the Executive Board of the Commonwealth Alliance of Youth Work Associations, and teaches in the Child and Youth Care program at Nova Scotia Community College. Her work focuses on relational leadership, mentoring and strengthening the profession.

Maxwell Smart (Scotland) works in the Scottish Hebrides as (Interim) Chief Officer for Children's Services. Max is a qualified Social Worker but has primarily had a focus in residential care where he spent most of his career, returning to Children & Families Social Work in 2023. Max has been involved as a manager and leader for almost 3 decades and has contributed to the field in writing, research and training.

Dr. Zeni Thumbadoo (South Africa) is Deputy Director of the National Association of Child Care Workers, brings over 40 years of leadership in South Africa's children's sector, spanning direct practice, policy, and systems strengthening. She spearheaded professionalisation of child and youth care work, led development of the Isibindi model, and serves on national and international professional and editorial boards.

Kristie Tyson (Canada) has served as a Program Supervisor with Amal Youth and Family Centre for the past three years. She supports a team of Child and Youth Care Workers fostering growth through relational practice. She is passionate about empowering children and youth, building meaningful connections, and helping young people achieve their full potential.

Werner van der Westhuizen (South Africa) is a social worker in private practice with a special interest in relational practice. With 30 years' experience in social work and child & youth care practice and leadership, he is the author of *Building Resilience in Children* (2024) and the editor of Practice Matters, a practice journal for social workers in South Africa.

Krista West (Canada) is a mental health professional and Chief Operating Officer at Wood's Homes, with more than two decades of experience in therapeutic care, and strategic program leadership. Krista brings a relational and strategic lens to building therapeutic environments that are inclusive, trauma-informed, and aligned with community need.

Jessica Williams (Canada) is a co-coordinator and instructor with the Child and Youth Care program at Douglas College in Coquitlam, BC, Canada. She is also a therapist in private practice where she primarily works alongside children, youth, and families. Prior to joining Douglas College, Jessica held coordination and leadership roles in health care and community recreation.

Review – A Policing Perspective

Denis Whelan, Former Garda Superintendent

I enjoyed this book mainly because it was so relevant to me, not only as a leader but also as someone who has worked under and alongside many different leaders and leadership styles during my 32 years in An Garda Síochána (AGS), the Irish Policing Service. While reading the book, I found myself examining my own leadership style, or styles, and I found that process fascinating.

As a former Garda Superintendent, I found the concept of Relational Leadership particularly relevant. Throughout my Garda career, I experienced and observed a wide range of leadership styles, from highly authoritarian and command-driven approaches to more collaborative, democratic and supportive forms of leadership.

My own leadership style was, and I always felt this to be the case, to some extent a combination of these different approaches, depending on the circumstances, the people involved and the operational demands of the situation.

However, looking back, I can now see that relational leadership was woven through my approach, even though I would not have described it in those terms at the time. Building relationships, understanding people, listening, gaining trust and knowing when to be firm or supportive were all important elements of effective leadership and very much reflected the way I operated.

The strongest aspect of the book for me is its central message that leadership is fundamentally relational. The idea that leaders are constantly weaving relationships through their everyday interactions is both practical

and powerful. It recognises that leadership is not simply about policies, structures, targets or decision-making, but about how people experience their leader.

My fear for AGS is that it can retreat towards this type of management in an effort to tick all the boxes. It is my firm belief that under previous executive leadership, an excessive focus on paperwork, following policies and procedures, and protecting yourself from potential disciplinary issues forced AGS to regress as an organisation.

Under the current Commissioner, and his more empathetic and relational leadership style, that fear has been removed and, as a result, morale is climbing from a very low base. It is evident that his leadership style allows the other leaders under him to exercise a similar style without fear of being chastised.

I particularly liked the emphasis on trust, curiosity, empathy, integrity and reflection. These are qualities that are extremely important in any leadership environment, and particularly in policing and other public-service organisations. Without trust, organisations, especially police services, would not be able to operate effectively.

I also liked the use of real-life stories. They make the concepts easier to understand and demonstrate how relational leadership can operate in real situations rather than remaining purely theoretical. They also help to break up any potential academic heaviness within the book.

I liked that the book does not attempt to replace existing leadership styles. In my own experience, effective leadership often requires a combination of approaches. There are times when a leader needs to be direct and decisive, while at other times collaboration, coaching or support are more appropriate. Relational weaving is something that can run through all these approaches rather than being a replacement for them.

With my Garda hat on, what particularly struck me was the emphasis on empathy, humanity and even love as elements of leadership.

Within An Garda Síochána, showing too much empathy or compassion could sometimes be perceived as a sign of weakness, particularly within a traditional hierarchical and command-and-control culture. Strong leadership was often associated with being firm, decisive and maintaining

authority. Love was never a word you would associate with AGS managers and their leadership styles.

My experience, however, has shown me that empathy and strength are not opposites. My experience as a leader illustrated that you could exercise authority and hold people accountable while still treating people with dignity, understanding and respect. However, I observed plenty of colleagues who could not operate in that way.

This is where I believe Relational Weaving has considerable potential within policing. It challenges the assumption that showing humanity weakens authority and instead suggests that trust, empathy, integrity and genuine relationships can actually strengthen leadership and make authority more effective.

There is no doubt in my experience that the newer, younger leaders in AGS are far more conscious of their people and their wellbeing, especially in relation to mental health.

One quick example of this illustrates the point.

A member who I knew to be struggling with some mental health issues was being managed by a senior officer. This officer was intolerant and dismissive when the issue of his mental health was raised. The attitude was essentially, "You are a 6ft 4in male, so get over it." There was no empathy or meaningful support, which ultimately forced the member to go on sick leave for an extended period.

I subsequently replaced the senior manager and because I had worked for years with mental health organisations, I was far more in tune with the issues the member was experiencing. By showing some empathy and providing some flexibility and support, he returned to work and is now in a much better place and much happier in his work environment.

For me, this is relational leadership in practice. Nothing about the role of Superintendent changed. The authority, accountability and responsibilities remained. What changed was the relationship and the way in which that authority was exercised.

I was pleased to note that the book does address accountability, and I believe this is something that could be further developed as the idea of relational leadership evolves. In organisations such as policing, emergency

services, healthcare and the military, leaders sometimes must make difficult decisions, enforce standards, challenge poor performance and exercise authority.

It would be a useful next step for the authors to demonstrate more explicitly how relational leadership operates when the leader has to say no, impose discipline or make a decision that is unpopular. These are the moments when leadership is often most difficult, and they provide an important opportunity to demonstrate that relational leadership does not mean avoiding difficult conversations or decisions.

I also believe there is an opportunity for more sector-specific examples. The principles are presented as applicable across organisations, which is one of the strengths of the book. Examples from policing, emergency services, education, healthcare, business and community organisations could further demonstrate how the same relational thread can look different in different environments.

I found the book thought-provoking and highly relevant to my own experience of leadership. It caused me to reflect on aspects of my own leadership style and recognise that many of the principles described as Relational Weaving were things I had incorporated into my own approach, even though I did not have that terminology at the time.

I believe this approach has great potential as a leadership development and training framework, including within organisations such as An Garda Síochána. Its greatest strength is perhaps that it does not ask leaders to abandon authority, decisiveness or accountability. Instead, it asks them to consider how they exercise those responsibilities and, importantly, the relationships they create in doing so.

From my own experience, I would strongly agree with the underlying proposition that effective leadership is not simply about what a leader achieves, but about how they achieve it and the impact they have on the people around them.

About the Authors



Dr. Heather Modlin has nearly 40 years of experience in child and youth care, primarily in leadership roles. She is CEO of Amal Youth and Family Centre in Newfoundland and Labrador and Chair of the Board of Governors of the International Child and Youth Care Network (CYC-Net), as well as a board member of FICE Canada. Heather holds a PhD in Child and Youth Care from the University of Victoria and has published numerous journal articles and book chapters.

Heather's leadership has been recognized through honours including the Women of Distinction Award for Community and Social Development (2017), the RBC Canadian Entrepreneur Social Change Award – Atlantic Canada Finalist (2018), the Stand Up for Kids Lynn Factor Award – Finalist (2019), and the Unity Award (2024). Organizations she has led have also received Employer of Distinction and Best Workplaces in Canada recognition.



Dr. John M Digney began his undergraduate degree in Applied Psychology in 1987 and has since worked predominantly in mental health and children and family services. He has also worked in frontline and clinical practice and in academia. Since 2001, John has held various management and leadership roles, including as a Unit Manager and Deputy Director levels within Ireland's Health Boards and Health Service Executive. He is currently the National Training and Development Coordinator for Tusla (Ireland Child and Family Agency). John has management and leadership qualifications from the Irish Management Institute (with distinction) and a master's degree in project management from the University of Limerick. In addition to his formal work roles, John has served as Chair of several voluntary organisations and Board member of local community associations.

In a field crowded with prescriptions about what leaders should do, this book offers something both more fundamental and more practical ... That is a contribution worth paying attention to.

Dr. William Kahn
Boston University – Questrom School of Business

Relational leadership as presented here is personally healing, collectively nourishing and organizationally transformative ... This is a unique and important contribution.

Dr. James P. Anglin
Emeritus Professor, School of Child and Youth Care – University of Victoria, Canada

This book offers a compelling vision of relational leadership, rooted in the understanding that meaningful change happens through the intentional 'weaving' of relationships. It is an inspiring and thought-provoking guide for leaders.

Neil Gentleman
Children and Families Social Work – Children's Services, Orkneys

This book captures why relational leadership matters ... This thoughtful and practical book offers valuable guidance for leaders across sectors who want to build cultures in which both people and purpose can thrive.

Coenraad de Beer
Strategy, Research and Development Advisor – SOS Children's Villages International, Austria

The reader is invited to undertake a Leadership journey, into what many may describe as a very cluttered landscape. The book eases the reader into what is a very skillful and carefully structured roadmap of discovery.

Ross Drummond
Independent Chair, Adult and Child Protection Committees – Outer Hebrides, Scotland

I found the book thought-provoking and highly relevant to my own experience of leadership ... I believe this approach has great potential as a leadership development and training framework.

Denis Whelan
Former Garda Superintendent – Ireland

I LOVE this book! I love this book so much I want to teach it ... I hope that all who read this book find it as inspirational as I have. It was a privilege to read and has had a profound impact on me.

Sineag Blane
Area Principal Teacher Learning Support – Uist and Barra, Scotland



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