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The Principles of Good Leadership

Leading well means exceeding goals by growing people.

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From good governance to good leadership

Good governance sets the rules by which an organization is directed and controlled. Good leadership is the same idea carried into the behavior of the people who run it, and that behavior is what makes the rules hold.

Good governance is a settled idea. In 1989 the World Bank spoke for the first time of a crisis of governance. In 1992 the Cadbury Report brought it to business: corporate governance is the system by which companies are directed and controlled. Then came the OECD principles, laws such as Sarbanes-Oxley, the United Nations' Goal 16 and the international standard ISO 37000. In Spain, listed companies follow on average 88.2% of the recommendations in their governance code. [27] [28] [29] [30] [31] [13] [22]

And still, the great failures happened with the structure in order. In 2000, *Chief Executive* magazine named Enron's board one of the five best in the United States; by the end of 2001, Enron was bankrupt. Wells Fargo and Boeing also had a board, committees, a code and an auditor, and the official investigations pointed to the culture and behavior of the people in charge. Yale's Jeffrey Sonnenfeld summed it up in *Harvard Business Review* in 2002, after finding that the boards that had failed followed most of the accepted rules: what sets a board apart is how its people work together. [18] [19] [20] [32]

Rules don't keep themselves. Someone keeps them, enforces them or hollows them out: the person in charge. The individual executive explains a significant share of how a company invests, raises money and organizes itself, and the person who manages a team accounts for at least 70% of the variance in engagement across teams. The standards themselves recognize it: ISO 37000 asks the governing body to lead the organization ethically and effectively. [17] [11] [13]

In most organizations, good governance is one person. In Spain, 99.8% of companies are small or medium-sized, and more than half have no employees. Most have no board and no committees. Their good governance is the behavior of the person who runs them. [24]

That is where good leadership comes from. Good leadership is good governance carried into the behavior of anyone who leads people: principles you can keep, observe and require, like those in a code, in the daily life of a team. Governance rules set the floor. The Principles of Good Leadership describe what you can see above it. [1]

What good leadership is

Leading well means exceeding goals by growing people.

People grow first, and that is why goals are exceeded. Whoever chases results by wearing out their team gets them once and pays for them later; whoever grows their team gets them every year, and goes further each time. Putting people first is the shortest path to the goals, and the only one that lasts.

These principles let anyone who leads, and any organization, recognize good leadership, measure themselves against it and commit in public to practicing it.

The seven principles

PRINCIPLE	STATEMENT
1. Purpose	Whoever leads knows why they lead, and their team knows it too.
2. Preparation	Leading can be learned, and whoever leads never stops preparing.
3. Trust	On the team of someone who leads well, people can tell the truth.
4. Growth	Whoever leads well grows people until they can take their place.
5. Sustainability	Goals are exceeded with people, and their human cost counts as a result.
6. Self-awareness	Whoever leads knows themselves, asks for the truth about themselves, and uses it.
7. Integrity	Whoever leads the organization lives up, in their behavior, to what the organization declares.

The twenty behaviors

The signals you can see from outside. Each one is a face of the icosahedron, the symbol of the principles.

- 1 The team explains its priorities in the same words as the person who leads it. Purpose
- 2 Hard decisions are justified by the purpose, and it shows. Purpose
- 3 Nobody leads people without first preparing to do it. Preparation
- 4 Whoever leads spends time every year training how they lead, with real practice and input from their team. Preparation
- 5 What they learn shows later in their behavior, and someone checks. Preparation
- 6 Bad news arrives early, and people are thanked for bringing it. Trust
- 7 Someone can say no in a meeting, and nothing bad happens. Trust

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- 8 Different voices change decisions. Trust
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- 9 They delegate real decisions, and people take on more responsibility every year. Growth
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- 10 There are successors ready for the critical roles. Growth
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- 11 People grow from within: internal promotions and mobility. Growth
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- 12 With the time artificial intelligence frees up, whoever leads is more present with their team, and people do higher-value work. Growth
-
- 13 Results are reviewed together with turnover, workload, and team burnout. Sustainability
-
- 14 The workload is sustainable: there is rest, and there are limits. Sustainability
-
- 15 They ask for input on how they lead from people who can give it without fear. Self-awareness
-
- 16 They check what they believe about themselves against what their team experiences. Self-awareness
-
- 17 They can be seen changing something after hearing it. Self-awareness
-
- 18 What gets reported matches what gets rewarded. Integrity
-
- 19 Whoever leads holds themselves accountable for their own example. Integrity
-
- 20 Decisions made under pressure follow the stated values. Integrity
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PRINCIPLE 1

Purpose

Whoever leads knows why they lead, and their team knows it too.

WHAT IT MEANS

Leading starts with a why that can be explained in plain words. Goals say how far you need to go; purpose says why it is worth it. When the purpose is shared, people make good decisions without waiting for instructions.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE IT

- 1 The team explains its priorities in the same words as the person who leads it.
- 2 Hard decisions are justified by the purpose, and it shows.

WHAT CONTRADICTS IT

- Goals nobody can explain beyond the number.
- Declaring autonomy while still deciding everything at the top.

WHAT IT ASKS OF THE ORGANIZATION

Spell out what leading well means here and what the strategy demands, without generic catalogs.

WHAT IT RESTS ON

David Marquet, *Turn the Ship Around!*: the submarine USS Santa Fe improved when its captain stopped giving orders and handed out decisions along with a clear intent; that crew went on to produce ten commanders. [2]

PRINCIPLE 2

Preparation

Leading can be learned, and whoever leads never stops preparing.

WHAT IT MEANS

Leading people is a different craft from the one that got someone into leadership. Being the best at your own work does not prepare you to make others better. Leadership is trained like any practice: by doing, with outside perspective, and over time.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE IT

- 3 Nobody leads people without first preparing to do it.
- 4 Whoever leads spends time every year training how they lead, with real practice and input from their team.
- 5 What they learn shows later in their behavior, and someone checks.

WHAT CONTRADICTS IT

- Promoting people for technical expertise without preparing them to lead others.
- Mistaking attending a course for changing behavior.

WHAT IT ASKS OF THE ORGANIZATION

Develop leaders through practice, outside perspective, and follow-up, and measure what changes in behavior more than the hours spent in courses.

WHAT IT RESTS ON

Lacerenza et al. (*Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2017), 335 samples: leadership training transfers to the job when there is practice, spacing, and feedback; with weekly sessions, the effect on results is almost three times that of daily sessions. At the top-executive level, transfer is about four times weaker. [3]

PRINCIPLE 3

Trust

On the team of someone who leads well, people can tell the truth.

WHAT IT MEANS

A team performs according to how its members treat each other, more than according to who is on it. Trust shows in something concrete: bad news travels up fast, and whoever brings it does not pay for it. Dissent is heard, and it changes decisions.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE IT

- 6 Bad news arrives early, and people are thanked for bringing it.
- 7 Someone can say no in a meeting, and nothing bad happens.
- 8 Different voices change decisions.

WHAT CONTRADICTS IT

- Problems that never travel up, and late surprises.
- Replacing difficult conversations with box-ticking.

WHAT IT ASKS OF THE ORGANIZATION

Channels for speaking up that nobody is afraid to use, because people have already seen what happens when someone speaks.

WHAT IT RESTS ON

Amy Edmondson (*Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1999), on psychological safety: in teams where people can speak up without fear, they learn and correct course sooner. Anita Woolley et al. (*Science*, 2010): a group's intelligence depends on social sensitivity and on everyone getting a share of the conversation. Alan Mulally at Ford (2006), as told by Bryce Hoffman in *American Icon*: he applauded the first red slide, and from then on the real problems started coming in. [4] [5] [6]

PRINCIPLE 4

Growth

Whoever leads well grows people until they can take their place.

WHAT IT MEANS

This is the half of the definition that gets forgotten most. Growing people is how you exceed goals. Whoever leaves it for when there is time to spare never gets to it. The test of good leadership is who remains when the leader leaves.

Artificial intelligence belongs here. It does in seconds the processing work that used to take up much of leading, and it frees up time. Whoever leads well puts it at the service of people: they use that time to be with their team, and they turn the tasks the machine takes over into chances for people to learn and take on higher-value work. The tool amplifies what its user already is.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE IT

- 9 They delegate real decisions, and people take on more responsibility every year.
- 10 There are successors ready for the critical roles.
- 11 People grow from within: internal promotions and mobility.
- 12 With the time artificial intelligence frees up, whoever leads is more present with their team, and people do higher-value work.

WHAT CONTRADICTS IT

- Everything going through the leader: the team's ceiling is the leader's calendar.
- Asking for collaboration while offering only individual incentives.
- Leaving succession until there is already a critical vacancy.
- Using artificial intelligence to cut people without preparing those who take on their work, or to hide behind a data dashboard.

WHAT IT ASKS OF THE ORGANIZATION

Hiring, promotions, and incentives that reward those who grow others, and artificial intelligence adopted with a plan for people to grow with it.

WHAT IT RESTS ON

William Muir (Purdue, *Poultry Science*, 1996): when he selected the groups that produced the most together, instead of individuals, mortality fell from 68% to 8.8% and production per animal rose 160%. Boris Groysberg (Harvard, *Chasing Stars*): star performers who change companies without their team see their performance drop for years. Castañer and Oliveira (*Journal of Management*, 2020): collaborating means contributing to others achieving their goals. [7] [8] [9]

PRINCIPLE 5

Sustainability

Goals are exceeded with people, and their human cost counts as a result.

WHAT IT MEANS

A result achieved at the team's expense is a debt paid later: in turnover, in burnout, in reputation. What lasts is what the team can sustain. Whoever leads well looks at what they achieve and at what it costs to achieve it, together.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE IT

- 13 Results are reviewed together with turnover, workload, and team burnout.
- 14 The workload is sustainable: there is rest, and there are limits.

WHAT CONTRADICTS IT

- Tolerating harmful behavior because it delivers results.
- Results that would not survive their full human cost coming to light.

WHAT IT ASKS OF THE ORGANIZATION

Act when the system tolerates behavior incompatible with its values, even when it delivers results.

WHAT IT RESTS ON

Gallup (*State of the Global Workplace*, 2026): the person who manages a team accounts for at least 70% of the variance in engagement across teams; in Spain, 10% of employees are engaged. Gallup puts the cost of replacing an employee at between half and twice their annual salary. ^[10] ^[11] ^[12]

PRINCIPLE 6

Self-awareness

Whoever leads knows themselves, asks for the truth about themselves, and uses it.

WHAT IT MEANS

What a leader believes about themselves and what their team experiences do not always match. The gap between the two views says more than any average. Whoever leads well looks for that gap, listens to it, and changes.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE IT

- 15 They ask for input on how they lead from people who can give it without fear.
- 16 They check what they believe about themselves against what their team experiences.
- 17 They can be seen changing something after hearing it.

WHAT CONTRADICTS IT

- Never checking what the leader believes about themselves against what their team experiences.
- Holding others accountable for their results and never holding yourself accountable for your own example.

WHAT IT ASKS OF THE ORGANIZATION

Look at leadership through several lenses at once: the leader's own view, the team's, observable behavior, and results in context. A single score gives false precision.

WHAT IT RESTS ON

The report “Del Buen Gobierno al Buen Liderazgo” (2026, in Spanish), ch. 11: a dashboard of signals works better than a single score. Our reading: there is less outside perspective at the top, because everyone who could tell the leader the truth has something at stake in what the leader decides. [1]

PRINCIPLE 7

Integrity

Whoever leads the organization lives up, in their behavior, to what the organization declares.

WHAT IT MEANS

Good governance rules set the floor. Whoever leads decides whether they are followed when nobody is watching. That is why every good governance requirement has another side: the behavior that makes it true. In most organizations, which have no board, good governance is simply the behavior of whoever leads them.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE IT

- 18 What gets reported matches what gets rewarded.
- 19 Whoever leads holds themselves accountable for their own example.
- 20 Decisions made under pressure follow the stated values.

WHAT CONTRADICTS IT

- Asking for innovation and punishing reasonable mistakes.
- An ethics code that says one thing and daily decisions that say another.

WHAT IT ASKS OF THE GOVERNING BODY

Oversee leadership the way it oversees risk: define what leading well means, align incentives, observe it, develop it, and respond when it fails.

WHAT IT RESTS ON

ISO 37000 (2021) asks the governing body to lead the organization ethically and effectively. Treviño, Hartman, and Brown (2000): an ethical reputation rests on being a moral person and on being a moral manager, one who makes ethics visible and demands it. Enron, Wells Fargo, and Boeing had a board, committees, a code, and an auditor; the official investigations pointed to the culture and the behavior of those at the top. In Spain, 99.8% of companies are small and medium-sized businesses.

[13] [15] [18] [19] [20] [24]

The principles of good governance

ISO 37000: eleven principles ^[55]

1. Purpose	The organization's reason for being, which guides everything else.
2. Value generation	How it creates, preserves and shares value, and for whom.
3. Strategy	The course by which the organization fulfills its purpose.
4. Oversight	Making sure the organization performs and delivers what was planned.
5. Accountability	Answering for decisions and their effects.
6. Stakeholder engagement	Listening to and taking into account those the organization affects.
7. Leadership	Leading the organization ethically and effectively, by example.
8. Data and decisions	Using information responsibly to make decisions.
9. Risk governance	Deciding which risks to take and how to control them.
10. Social responsibility	Answering for the impact on society and the environment.
11. Viability and performance over time	Making the organization last without mortgaging its future.

G20/OECD Principles of Corporate Governance (2023) ^[29]

1. Ensuring the basis for an effective corporate governance framework.
2. The rights and equitable treatment of shareholders and key ownership functions.
3. Institutional investors, stock markets, and other intermediaries.
4. Disclosure and transparency.
5. The responsibilities of the board.
6. Sustainability and resilience.

The ISO 37000 descriptions summarize each principle in our own words.

Good governance and good leadership, side by side

	GOOD GOVERNANCE	GOOD LEADERSHIP
What it governs	How an organization is directed and controlled.	How anyone who leads people conducts themselves.
The question	What must be protected, decided and overseen.	How people's judgment and behavior are mobilized.

	GOOD GOVERNANCE	GOOD LEADERSHIP
Who answers	The governing body: the board or whoever runs the company.	Anyone who leads people, at any level of the organization.
Where it's written	Laws, codes, bylaws and standards such as ISO 37000.	Principles and behaviors you can see from the outside.
How it's checked	Reports, audits and the “comply or explain” of the codes.	What the team experiences: behavioral signals checked with the people on the receiving end.
Who it reaches	Mostly large companies and listed companies.	Any organization, with or without a board.
Since when	World Bank (1989) and Cadbury Report (1992).	A hundred years of ideas on how to lead; these principles, in 2026.
Its limit	Rules don't keep themselves.	Without rules, everything depends on who happens to be in charge.

Proposed mapping to ISO 37000

Purpose	Purpose · Strategy
Preparation	Leadership
Trust	Oversight · Data and decisions
Growth	Value generation · Viability and performance over time
Sustainability	Viability and performance over time · Social responsibility
Self-awareness	Accountability · Risk governance
Integrity	Leadership · Stakeholder engagement

How the idea of a good leader has changed

A hundred years of ideas about leading and thirty-five of good governance rules, side by side. "A good leader was" is our own reading of the works cited.

1910-1930 · SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT

1911 Taylor, The Principles of Scientific Management: measure and standardize every task [33]; **1916** Fayol: plan, organize, command, coordinate and control [34].

A good leader was someone who organizes the work and makes sure it gets done efficiently.

1930-1950 · HUMAN RELATIONS AND TRAITS

1933 Mayo, after the Hawthorne studies: the group and attention weigh on performance [35]; **1948** Stogdill reviews 124 studies: traits alone don't explain leadership [36].

A good leader was someone with certain character traits who also looks after the group's climate.

1950-1970 · STYLES AND CONTINGENCY

1953 Ohio State studies: consideration and structure, two dimensions of behavior [37]; **1954** Drucker: management by objectives [38]; **1960** McGregor, Theory X and Theory Y: what bosses believe about their people changes how they lead [39]; **1964** Blake and Mouton, the Managerial Grid: task and people at once [40]; **1967** Fiedler: no single style is right for every situation [41]; **1969** Hersey and Blanchard: style adjusts to the team's maturity [42].

A good leader was someone who sets goals and adapts their style, between task and people, to each situation.

1970-1990 · SERVICE, TRANSFORMATION AND QUALITY

1970 Greenleaf, servant leadership: the test is whether those who follow you grow [43]; **1978** Burns: transactional and transformational leadership [44]; **1985** Bass: leadership that goes beyond expectations [45]; **1986** Deming: quality depends on the system management designs [46]. Good governance: **1989** The World Bank speaks of a crisis of governance [27].

A good leader was someone who inspires and transforms their team, or serves it so it can grow.

1990-2002 · LEARNING, EMOTIONS AND THE FIRST RULES

1990 Senge, the learning organization [47]; **1998** Goleman: emotional intelligence sets leaders apart [48]; **1999** Edmondson defines psychological safety in teams [4]; **2001** Collins, Level 5 leadership: humility and will at once [49]; **2001** The Agile Manifesto: self-organizing teams [50].

Good governance: **1992** Cadbury Report: how a company is directed and controlled [28]; **1999** OECD Principles of Corporate Governance [29]; **2002** Sarbanes-Oxley Act, after Enron's collapse [30].

A good leader was someone who learns, manages their emotions and combines humility with will.

2003-2015 · ETHICS AND AUTHENTICITY

2003 George, authentic leadership [51]; **2005** Brown, Treviño and Harrison define ethical leadership [16]; **2005** Avolio and Gardner: authentic leadership development [52]; **2015** Gallup: managers account for at least 70% of the variance in engagement across teams [11].

Good governance: **2015** UN Goal 16 and the Spanish governance code for listed companies (CNMV) [31].

A good leader was someone who knows themselves, acts with integrity and makes ethics visible in their decisions.

2016-2026 · CULTURE REACHES THE BOARD

2021 Inner Development Goals: the inner capabilities the SDGs call for [54]; **2026** Global engagement falls to 20%; in Spain, to 10% [10].

Good governance: **2016** The UK regulator puts culture on the board's agenda [53]; **2021** ISO 37000 includes leadership among its principles [13].

A good leader was someone who builds a culture where people can tell the truth and grow.

TODAY · THE PRINCIPLES OF GOOD LEADERSHIP

A good leader is someone who exceeds goals by growing people: the behavior that makes the rules come true.

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