

SKILLS. DECISIONS. DISCIPLINES.

LEADERSHIP IS TOUGH

WHAT GREAT LEADERS DO DIFFERENTLY



MARY KELLY & PETER STARK

Book Club Guide

Read deeply. Discuss honestly. Lead differently.

COURAGE • CLARITY • CONSISTENCY • CAPACITY

Welcome

Leadership Is Tough is written for leaders, executives, directors, senior managers, and anyone preparing to accept greater responsibility. This guide helps a reading group move beyond agreement and admiration into candid reflection, useful conversation, and observable leadership behavior.

Purpose Use the book as a mirror, not a scorecard for diagnosing everyone else.

How to Use This Guide

1. Read the assigned chapter before the meeting and mark one passage that challenged you.
2. Complete the brief reflection and arrive prepared to discuss a real situation without disclosing confidential information.
3. Listen to understand. Disagreement is useful when it remains respectful and specific.
4. End each meeting with one small, observable commitment. Begin the next meeting by reporting what happened.

Recommended Formats

Format	Reading plan	Best use
15 meetings	One chapter per meeting	Deep development and peer coaching
8 meetings	Use the paired/grouped plan in the Facilitator's Guide	Executive teams and busy leadership cohorts
3 meetings	Ch. 1–5, 6–11, 12–15	A high-level introduction and launch conversation

Discussion Covenant

- Confidentiality: lessons may leave the room; personal stories do not.
- Candor with care: say what is true without making another person small.
- Curiosity before certainty: ask before assuming.
- Equal contribution: make room for quieter voices and avoid monologues.
- Application over abstraction: connect ideas to actual leadership behavior.

Before You Begin: Personal Baseline

What currently makes leadership toughest for you?

What do people consistently need from you that is hard to provide?

What is one leadership pattern you want to change during this study?

Chapter 1 | Why Leadership Is Tough Today

The realities, tensions, and disciplines of modern leadership

Core idea Leadership is not prestige or positional authority. It is responsibility exercised while conditions shift, people are tired, tradeoffs are unavoidable, and the leader is always being watched. Tough leadership rests on clarity in the fog, courage to disappoint, consistency that builds trust, and capacity to go the distance.

Ideas to Notice

- Leadership myths can set otherwise capable people up to fail.
- External disruption, internal exhaustion, and structural tensions compound one another.
- The leader's behavior teaches the organization what is truly acceptable.

Discuss

5. Which leadership myth has been most costly in your own experience?
6. Where are you currently expected to balance two legitimate but competing demands?
7. When your team watches you under pressure, what do they learn?
8. Which discipline—clarity, courage, consistency, or capacity—most needs your attention?

Apply

Leadership Reality Check: Name one situation you have been avoiding. Write what is true, what is uncertain, who is affected, and what responsible leadership requires next.

Lead Differently

Within seven days, I will make one expectation clearer by...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 2 | Leading Change

In an uncertain and change-fatigued world

Core idea People are not naturally designed for endless speed and ambiguity. Change can threaten identity, overload cognition, and create behavior that looks like resistance. Leaders reduce avoidable uncertainty, acknowledge the predictable change curve, communicate repeatedly, and help people move from disruption toward adaptation.

Ideas to Notice

- Resistance often contains useful information about loss, identity, capacity, or risk.
- Cognitive overload silently damages productivity and judgment.
- Leading change is a repeatable discipline, not a charismatic personality trait.

Discuss

9. What loss or identity threat may be hiding beneath resistance in your organization?
10. Where has change fatigue become visible?
11. What do people need to know now, even if every detail is not settled?
12. How can you distinguish legitimate concern from refusal to adapt?

Apply

Change Map: Identify what is ending, what remains stable, what is beginning, and what support people need at each stage.

Lead Differently

I will reduce one source of avoidable uncertainty by...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 3 | Strategic Decision-Making

Make the call before the call is made for you

Core idea Leaders frequently delay because they want certainty, consensus, or approval. But delay is itself a decision, and it often narrows future options. Strong leaders act early enough to preserve choice, say no strategically, consult trusted counsel, communicate unpopular decisions honestly, own consequences, and correct course when wrong.

Ideas to Notice

- The need to be liked can quietly weaken decisiveness.
- Early action is rarely comfortable, but delay usually increases cost.
- Good judgment includes knowing when to decide, whom to consult, and how to learn afterward.

Discuss

13. What decision is becoming more expensive while you wait?
14. Which of the four common traps—more data, more consensus, more time, or protection of the status quo—most often catches you?
15. Who provides counsel without merely validating your preference?
16. What would honest communication sound like if the decision disappoints people?

Apply

Decision Brief: Define the decision, deadline, known facts, material unknowns, options, consequences, counsel needed, and the principle that should govern the call.

Lead Differently

The decision I will advance this week is...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 4 | Working Well with Others

How you treat people defines you

Core idea Working well with others is a leadership skill. Courtesy, humility, listening, explanation, recognition, and apology scale; arrogance does not. Seniority can turn into impatience unless leaders deliberately separate people from problems, listen beneath the first layer, explain the why, and model the behavior they expect up, down, and across the organization.

Ideas to Notice

- Leaders are always on display, especially in ordinary interactions.
- Simple language—thank you, I was wrong, what do you think?—has strategic value.
- Damaged relationships can often be repaired through ownership and changed behavior.

Discuss

17. How do people experience you when you are rushed or certain you are right?
18. Whose contribution have you failed to acknowledge?
19. Where has impatience displaced curiosity?
20. What relationship requires a sincere repair attempt?

Apply

Relationship Reset: Choose one strained relationship. Describe the pattern, your contribution, the conversation needed, and one behavior you will change.

Lead Differently

I will strengthen one relationship by...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 5 | Building Trust

Communicate and connect with others

Core idea Trust is the currency that makes leadership possible. It begins with self-trust and grows through competence, honesty, reliability, transparency, and connection. Trust gaps often emerge gradually through inconsistent standards, withheld information, broken commitments, or avoidance of hard truths. Rebuilding requires ownership, a credible repair plan, and consistent evidence over time.

Ideas to Notice

- Communication is the vehicle through which trust travels.
- Hard truths can strengthen trust when delivered early, clearly, and respectfully.
- Trust is built deliberately and repaired behaviorally—not through slogans.

Discuss

21. Where might your team see a trust gap that you do not?
22. Which small behavior could be quietly eroding credibility?
23. What hard truth needs to be communicated before it becomes a surprise?
24. If trust has been damaged, what evidence—not promises—would repair it?

Apply

Trust Ledger: List three deposits you make, three withdrawals you may be making, and one overdue repair.

Lead Differently

The trust-building behavior I will practice consistently is...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 6 | Empathy Is a Discipline

Understand without lowering the bar

Core idea Empathy is neither sympathy nor agreement. It is the disciplined effort to understand another person's perspective and relevant circumstances so the leader can respond wisely. Properly practiced, empathy improves diagnosis, communication, trust, and results. It works in partnership with accountability and does not excuse chronic underperformance.

Ideas to Notice

- Understanding someone is different from agreeing with them.
- Empathy helps leaders solve causes instead of repeatedly treating symptoms.
- The most humane response can include a clear standard and a difficult consequence.

Discuss

25. Where have you mistaken empathy for lowering standards?
26. Whose perspective have you interpreted without genuinely investigating?
27. What question would help you understand the cause beneath a behavior?
28. How can you express care while remaining clear about required results?

Apply

Empathy Interview: Before solving, ask what the person sees, fears, needs, and believes is getting in the way. Record what changed in your understanding.

Lead Differently

In my next difficult conversation, I will seek understanding by asking...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 7 | Priorities and Values

Align purpose with what actually gets done

Core idea Values become real when honoring them carries a cost. Misalignment occurs when leaders say one thing but reward, fund, schedule, or tolerate another. Strong leaders distinguish aspirational statements from operational values, build priorities into systems, teach people how to make tradeoffs, and recover visibly when decisions violate stated principles.

Ideas to Notice

- Budgets, calendars, promotions, and tolerated behavior reveal actual priorities.
- Not all values have equal weight when legitimate priorities conflict.
- Organizations need decision rules, not just value statements.

Discuss

29. What do your calendar and budget say you value?
30. Which stated value is contradicted by a current system or incentive?
31. What difficult tradeoff would reveal whether a value is genuine?
32. How should people decide when two organizational values conflict?

Apply

Alignment Audit: Choose one stated value and trace it through hiring, meetings, budget, recognition, promotion, and accountability.

Lead Differently

I will align one system with one stated value by...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 8 | Accountability

Hold the line without breaking trust

Core idea Accountability fails when expectations are vague, feedback is delayed, standards vary by person, or leaders avoid consequences. Healthy accountability exists at individual, team, leadership, and system levels. It combines clarity, timely conversations, support, follow-through, and fair consequences—especially for high performers whose behavior harms others.

Ideas to Notice

- Accountability is a system and culture, not a single difficult conversation.
- Inconsistent enforcement teaches people that standards are negotiable.
- Empathy and accountability reinforce one another when both are disciplined.

Discuss

33. Where are expectations too vague to support fair accountability?
34. Who receives exceptions because they produce results?
35. What has avoidance already cost the team?
36. At which level—individual, team, leadership, or system—is accountability weakest?

Apply

Accountability Conversation Plan: State the agreed expectation, observed gap, impact, the other person's perspective, required reset, support, deadline, and consequence.

Lead Differently

The accountability conversation I will no longer postpone is...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 9 | Leadership Gets Lonely

Lead yourself when you are the one in charge

Core idea Responsibility can isolate leaders from candid feedback, peer connection, and appropriate support. Privacy is sometimes necessary; isolation is dangerous. Leaders need trusted advisors and intentional connection while also building psychological safety, connection rituals, and steadiness for teams—especially in remote and hybrid environments.

Ideas to Notice

- The myth of the self-sufficient leader weakens judgment.
- Loneliness may be present even when people never name it.
- Steadiness is different from stoicism; leaders can be human without becoming destabilizing.

Discuss

37. Where has necessary privacy become unhealthy isolation?
38. Who can challenge your thinking without organizational politics?
39. What signs of isolation are visible on your team?
40. Which connection ritual would feel authentic rather than forced?

Apply

Leadership Support Map: Identify a truth-teller, peer, mentor, expert advisor, and personal supporter. Note the relationship that needs strengthening.

Lead Differently

I will reduce isolation by reconnecting with...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 10 | Resilience Is Earned

Develop capacity, withstand pressure, avoid burnout

Core idea Resilience is not a fixed personality trait or heroic endurance. Stress becomes dangerous through unmanaged accumulation. Leaders build capacity through recovery, boundaries, honest assessment, strategic constraints, daily disciplines, and organizational practices that prevent exhaustion from becoming the operating model.

Ideas to Notice

- Stress is not automatically the enemy; unrelieved accumulation is.
- Burnout can appear as cynicism, poor judgment, withdrawal, or reduced effectiveness.
- Resilience is built personally and structurally over time.

Discuss

41. What pressure is accumulating without recovery?
42. Which early warning sign do you tend to ignore?
43. What strategic constraint would protect your most important capacity?
44. Where does your organization reward unsustainable behavior?

Apply

Capacity Plan: Name your largest demand, current warning signs, nonnegotiable recovery practice, boundary, and person who will help you remain honest.

Lead Differently

To protect long-term capacity, I will stop, start, or protect...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 11 | Managing Time and Energy

Achieve the most important results

Core idea Leaders do not simply manage hours; they allocate energy, attention, and opportunity. The 168-hour reality exposes the cost of drift. The leadership triage framework—Decide, Do, Delegate, Develop, Delete—helps leaders reclaim focus, address procrastination, improve meetings, and redirect work toward the most important results.

Ideas to Notice

- Calendars expose priorities more reliably than intentions.
- Delegation can solve today; development strengthens tomorrow.
- Small habits and ruthless meeting discipline return meaningful capacity.

Discuss

45. Where does your time allocation contradict your stated priorities?
46. What are you doing that should be delegated, developed, or deleted?
47. Which energy leak repeatedly weakens your best hours?
48. What meeting exists because of habit rather than value?

Apply

168-Hour Audit: Track one representative week, then classify major activities using Decide, Do, Delegate, Develop, or Delete.

Lead Differently

I will reclaim time and energy by...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 12 | Succession Planning

Build your bench and future-proof the organization

Core idea Succession planning is stewardship and readiness—not replacement. Organizations create risk when critical knowledge, relationships, or authority sit with one person. Leaders must protect critical roles, build bench strength at multiple levels, develop people without promising positions, compare internal and external options, and make succession a continuing culture rather than an emergency event.

Ideas to Notice

- Indispensability is a vulnerability, not a leadership achievement.
- Readiness includes emergency continuity and long-term development.
- Boards and executives share responsibility for succession risk.

Discuss

49. Which role represents the greatest single point of failure?
50. What knowledge or relationship is trapped in one person?
51. Who could be ready sooner with a deliberate development assignment?
52. How can you discuss development without implying a promotion promise?

Apply

Bench Snapshot: Select five critical roles. For each, name emergency coverage, possible successors, readiness gaps, and one development action this quarter.

Lead Differently

The succession risk I will reduce first is...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 13 | Mentorship Is a Decision

Advice for purposeful development

Core idea Modern mentorship must move beyond informal advice, personality matching, and time served. High performers may stall because technical success has not prepared them to lead. Effective mentorship is intentional, behavior-based, connected to real work, reinforced by feedback and accountability, and supported as a system rather than a one-time program.

Ideas to Notice

- Mentorship should accelerate capability, not merely transfer anecdotes.
- Experience alone does not make someone an effective mentor.
- Development works best when practice, feedback, exposure, and accountability are connected.

Discuss

53. Where has informal mentorship produced uneven access?
54. Which leadership skill do high performers need before their next role?
55. What makes a mentor credible for a particular development goal?
56. How will you know whether mentorship is producing capability?

Apply

Development Contract: Define one capability, a real assignment to practice it, feedback sources, meeting cadence, evidence of growth, and an end date.

Lead Differently

I will make development more intentional by...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 14 | Leading Your Board

Without losing control

Core idea The leader-board relationship is built before formal meetings. Effective executives respect governance without surrendering executive responsibility, keep the board strategic, deliver bad news early, maintain boundaries with individual members, cultivate a strong chair relationship, and address dysfunction before it destabilizes the organization.

Ideas to Notice

- Respect is not deference; healthy governance requires clarity of roles.
- Bad news delivered early becomes currency for trust.
- Individual board influence must not override collective governance.

Discuss

57. Where are governance and management responsibilities blurred?

58. What information does the board receive too late?

59. How strong is the relationship between the chief executive and board chair?

60. What board behavior needs a boundary, conversation, or structural correction?

Apply

Board Partnership Review: Assess role clarity, information flow, strategic focus, chair partnership, member boundaries, and succession oversight.

Lead Differently

I will strengthen board leadership by...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Chapter 15 | Becoming a Transformative Leader

Choose the disciplines that outlast your position

Core idea Transformative leadership changes how people think, decide, and lead after the leader is gone. It requires inner work, a personal leadership vision, courage at higher levels, letting go of control, daily disciplines, resistance to ego and short-term pressure, and an intentional legacy built through stronger people and systems.

Ideas to Notice

- Transformation is a choice, not a career stage.
- Effective leaders deliver results; transformative leaders also expand the capacity of others.
- Legacy is what remains capable when the leader is no longer present.

Discuss

61. What should be stronger because you led?
62. What must you let go of for other leaders to grow?
63. Which daily discipline would make your leadership vision visible?
64. Would your current systems produce good decisions in your absence?

Apply

Transformation Test: What are you improving now? What will continue without you? Who is becoming more capable because of your leadership?

Lead Differently

The leadership legacy I will begin building now is...

Opening Check-In for the Next Meeting

What did you try? What happened? What will you keep, adjust, or stop?

Final Integration: Your 90-Day Leadership Plan

Do not attempt to improve everything at once. Select the few disciplines that will produce the greatest difference in your current role.

Priority	Observable behavior	Evidence by Day 90	Accountability partner
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Questions for the Whole Book

- 65. Which idea changed how you define leadership?
- 66. Which chapter made you most uncomfortable—and why?
- 67. Where did the book confirm something you already knew but had not acted on?
- 68. What should your team experience differently because you read this book?
- 69. What will be stronger and more capable after your leadership ends?

Closing Commitment

The leader I intend to become is someone who...

The first evidence of that change will be...