



DE SCHOOL
VOOR
TRANSITIE

DÉ EXPERT IN
SECURE BASE LEIDERSCHAP

The power of Secure Base Leadership

Getting organizations, teams and employees to excel

The power of Secure Base Leadership

Executive leadership in context

- + *As the HR director of a healthcare institution, Peter was tasked with overseeing a major reorganization, as part of which more than one hundred employees would be made redundant. These were generally employees who had been with the organization for a long time. Many supervisors approach Peter and his team for advice on how to conduct these conversations. They struggle with the question of how they can be there for their staff, while also focusing on the continuity of the business.*
- + *Caroline began her new job as CEO of an organization on the eve of a major change. Her predecessor had mainly focused his attention outward. Client satisfaction was the main KPI that the organization - successfully - focused on. What Caroline found was a neglected internal organization in which a culture of insecurity and fear had grown due to a lack of personal connection. The absenteeism and staff turnover rates were unusually high.*
- + *Achmed works as COO. His tech business has been growing non-stop for years. Even during the financial crisis, it was able to realize increased revenue by focusing largely on the Asian market. The core of the organization's success lies in the innovative strength of its mostly young workforce. Nevertheless, there is one major concern. Despite the available growth opportunities, Achmed now views the company's direction - which seemed so successful for years - as problematic. It is not resulting in the expected loyalty and retention needed to continue the organization's innovation and growth.*

Most executives will recognize parts of the experiences of Achmed, Caroline and Peter. They know that leadership is about changing, taking on challenges, uncertainty, getting your hands dirty and frequently tearing your hair out. What choices should you make? What direction should you choose? Is the past in the past or do you look back from time to time? How do you enter the future? Do you avoid busywork and uncomfortable situations or do you tackle the problem head on?

These are all relevant questions if you want to exert your influence, make an impact and achieve results as a manager. There are no quick fixes for most of the challenges that managers face and the Holy Grail of leadership has not been found yet. However, there is a leadership approach that demonstrably helps organizations transform into more positive workplaces where connection, enjoyment,

movement and sustainable growth are key concerns. This approach cannot be implemented or executed overnight. What it does is truly bring the head, heart and hands together and use that as a starting point from which organizations can excel. That is the power of **secure base leadership**.

Secure base leadership helps leaders who want to take the next step to move beyond mere tricks and methods and develop effective leadership from a foundation of authenticity. It is a demonstrably effective method with which to search for, uncover and activate the untapped potential within yourself and others.

Introduction

Secure base leadership is about staying connected to each other, employees and yourself during times of (major) pressure and change. It is about self-knowledge, learning to understand the roots of your leadership and enabling employees to excel by strengthening their personal resilience and emotional intelligence. Secure base leaders can take the performances of their teams and departments to the next level.

This leadership approach and the manner in which De School voor Transitie works with it are derived in part from the works of George Kohlrieser, former hostage negotiator and professor of leadership and organizational behavior at IMD (International Institute for Management Development) in Lausanne, Switzerland and Singapore.

He demonstrates that managers must be able to develop emotional connections in the workplace.



What is Secure Base Leadership?

A Secure Base is a person, place, goal or object that provides a sense of protection, safety and caring and offers a source of inspiration and energy for daring, exploration, risk taking and seeking challenge.

A secure base differs from the traditional hierarchical image of a leader who stands above their employees and invites them to find their way to the top. In many ways, being a secure base leader is like belaying a rock climber. The climber is attached to one end of the rope, while the belay partner holds on to the other end. They give the climber enough slack to move up, while still keeping the rope tight enough to keep them from falling too far, should they slip during their climb. While the climber ascends the mountainside, their belay partner facilitates them in their efforts. They hold the rope tight or give more slack when needed. This allows the climber to better cope with the risks of the ascent, because their belay partner offers them a sense of security.

In an organization where the “leader” offers their team members a secure base, just like the belay partner in the example, those team members will do their jobs with more energy and enthusiasm.

They dare to take risks and make (unorthodox) choices because they know their leader has their back and offers them the space they need to gather new and educational experiences. Successes and failures are both sources of development. One key requirement is that it must be possible to engage in a dialogue about these experiences in an environment of safety and trust. Especially when dealing with failure, the importance of safety and trust should not be underestimated.

This educational dialogue not only boosts the employee’s enjoyment of their work, but also helps them perform better.

One of the most prevalent myths is that of the self-made leader. Every leader stands on the shoulders of those that came before them. 95% of leadership is nurture, not nature, and therefore requires practice.

Secure base leaders inspire. If you cannot inspire, you cannot lead. You can do other things, such as manage, but you cannot lead. As a result, people do not truly follow you and you lack sufficient influence to create an impact. A secure base leader therefore knows that they must first lead themselves. They know what their sources of inspiration are and truly feel connected to them. This forms the foundation of their ability to lead others.

For whom is Secure Base Leadership?

Secure Base Leadership is for everyone. It is about people's inherent ability to live up to their full potential. It builds on the positive and negative experiences we have thus far had in our lives. It challenges us to keep learning and overcome the barriers that keep us from finding true joy and experiencing success.

Kohlrieser's work is based on, among other things, research conducted by John Bowlby, founder of the modern attachment theory. Attachment has to do with man's inherent need to feel closeness and security with someone who creates a feeling of safety. We have all had both positive and negative experiences when it comes to safety. >

All these experiences affect how we have shaped ourselves as leaders, how we accept help during our own growth process and how we form connections with employees and support and encourage them. Leaders excel when they encourage others to take risks (daring) from a foundation of safety (caring). As a leader, being a secure base as a leader might seem easy, but it is quite a challenge for many. In order to truly bond with others, leaders must be able to show their vulnerable side themselves and invite their employees to do the same.

#1 Reason why leaders from around the world fail = Leaders do not bond (well) enough.

Reflection questions

- How connected are you to your team? What about your individual employees?
- How would your employees answer this question? When was the last time you asked them this question?
- What is a reason for you to truly connect to your employees and what is a reason for you not to do so?

Forming bonds coincides with a person's growing emotional intelligence, as leadership expert Daniel Goleman calls it. Emotional intelligence allows leaders to put themselves in other people's shoes, bond with them and, in doing so, be an example during times of change. Most leaders believe they have a higher emotional intelligence than their followers. That is worrisome, because global employee satisfaction studies show that >

employees structurally experience too little involvement in their work. The lack of a true bond with their manager is the main negative factor in this. Secure base leaders can make a difference. They are willing to do what it takes to create bonds with their employees. They are able to understand the pain that changes cause. From there, they can inspire those around them and facilitate movement towards the future.

First connect, then lead. First the pain, then the benefit.

The nine characteristics of a Secure Base Leader

Kohlrieser and his colleagues have conducted extensive research into the effects of Secure Base Leadership and, in particular, what a Secure Base Leader actually does.

They have identified nine characteristics of Secure Base Leaders:

- 1 Keeps calm
- 2 Accepts others
- 3 Sees the potential
- 4 Listens and asks questions
- 5 Delivers a powerful message
- 6 Focuses on the positive
- 7 Encourages others to take risks
- 8 Inspires through intrinsic motivation
- 9 Signals accessibility

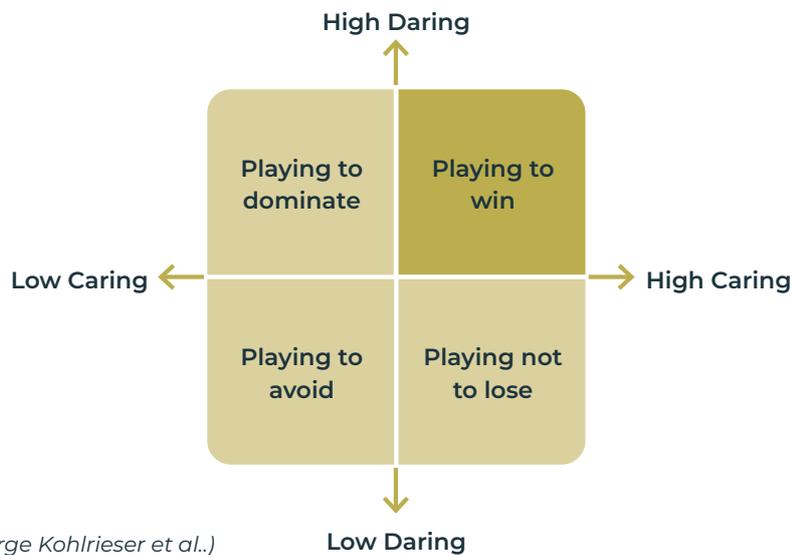
With training and by practicing these characteristics, you can (further) develop your own Secure Base Leadership.



Secure base leaders are playing to win

Employees whose manager forms bonds, appears trustworthy, is genuinely curious and listens without immediately responding feel safe and appreciated in the workplace. From this foundation of caring – the comfort zone – secure base leaders create the space to challenge employees to explore and experiment (daring – stepping outside one’s comfort zone). Safety is therefore not a goal in and of itself; rather, it is the necessary soil >

from which the growth and development of individuals, teams and the organization as a whole can grow. A secure base leader has a “playing to win” mentality. They are always looking for the ultimate balance of 100% caring and 100% daring. People are challenged to be courageous, take risks, experiment and learn from their successes and failures, so they can ultimately achieve great things together.



People with a “Playing to Win” mindset consistently direct their focus towards growth and development; wanting to be better tomorrow than they are today. It is not about wanting to be better than others, but about >

wanting to be better than yourself in relation to others. This calls for collaboration, enjoyment and the willingness to do whatever it takes. The latter is particularly important; one must be willing and unafraid to take risks.

#2 Reason why leaders from around the world fail = Leaders take too few risks

Reflection questions

- + How have you learned to look at risk in your life? Who played a major role in this development?
- + What feedback do you get from your manager with regard to taking risks?
- + What risk do you have to take in order to elevate your leadership to the next level?

Leaders constantly have to ask themselves the following question: Am I playing to win? If the answer is “no,” they must find out what it takes for them, their employees, the team >

and the organization as a whole to once again reach a state in which caring and daring are properly balanced.

Dialogue is the key to success

The most important tool that leaders possess is dialogue. In this case, a dialogue is defined as a search conducted by two or more people to find a previously unknown truth. Engaging in a dialogue requires more than listening to respond; it calls for genuine curiosity regarding what the other person has to say, acceptance of the other person's experience and empathy, i.e. a willingness to put yourself in the other person's position. >

Dialogue requires a willingness to engage in difficult conversations, get everything out in the open and dissect the matter at hand together in the spirit of curiosity. During a dialogue, two (or more) people are connected, discuss what needs discussing and can share ideas. However, there are only few organizations where dialogues actually take place on a structural basis.

#3 Reason why leaders from around the world fail = Leaders avoid conflict

Reflection questions

- + What have you learned about conflict in your life?
- + What is your primary impulse in a conflict situation?
- + How does your primary impulse impact the effectiveness of your leadership?

Successful teams are not characterized by the absence of conflict, but rather by the occurrence of conflict and the team members' ability to use it to facilitate growth. >

To play to win, secure base leaders get involved in conflicts, explore differences, bring matters out into the open and dissect them. They do not view conflict as something negative, but rather as something fundamentally positive. This is because conflicts are essentially about differences. By engaging in and resolving conflicts, the full potential of employees, teams and the organization itself can be discovered and utilized.



Secure base leaders shape transition

Leaders are constantly confronted with change. They are expected to oversee these changes and do so while focusing on the substance, the process and the people. Change is about the movement from situation A to situation B. Transition is the emotional process that >

people go through during a change. This transition is not easy to manage and demands a willingness from leaders to take a moment together with employees to reflect on what is being lost, before shifting the focus towards the future.

You cannot say hello before you say goodbye

In an organizational context, we distinguish between three layers at which change can occur. Every change involves some degree of loss. These losses and their impact can vary in scope and may occur at one or more levels simultaneously.

- 1 Organizational level
- 2 Professional level
- 3 Personal level

When people experience loss, they are confronted with grief. There are many >

forms of grieving. It is about the way in which people learn to cope with a new reality in which something was lost.

There is grieving in organizations as well. Employees grieve for lost projects, dissolved teams, departing supervisors, missed promotions, broken connections, organizational changes, name changes, as well as losses in their personal lives, such as the death of a relative, a divorce, lost friendships, etcetera.

*#4 Reason why leaders from around the world fail =
Leaders insufficiently shape transition*

Reflection questions

- + What did you learn about transition in your life?
- + What has been an important transition in your history and how does it influence your leadership?
- + How does transition play a role in your present life. How does it influence your leadership?

A secure base leader is willing to reflect on what is being lost and create some space to say goodbye and let go, before shifting the focus towards the future. They consciously move through the steps of the Circle of Transition (see box) and are aware of the necessity of saying goodbye and grieving that which is being lost to ensure the loss can be integrated. They believe grieving is >

needed to free up energy to take on new challenges and for people so they can connect to new initiatives. If they are not given this opportunity, employees will stagnate. This stagnation often results in forms of resistance, lack of motivation, isolation, etcetera.

Coping with transition



(Circle of Transition: Jakob van Wielink, Leo Wilhelm et al.)

The Circle of Transition is a framework developed by Jakob van Wielink and Leo Wilhelm. It shows how the themes of contact and welcome, attachment and resilience, connection and intimacy, loss and goodbye, grieving and integration are connected to meaning and calling. The various themes are interconnected. Every new bond we form contains repetitions of themes from earlier relationships, which ultimately goes all the way back to our earliest experiences and the first bonds we ever formed.

If we assume that all relationships we form will ultimately be broken, loss and goodbye are therefore inextricably linked to contact and welcome. This cycle of forming emotional bonds, maintaining them, ending them and forming new ones is a fundamental component of secure base leadership.

Successful leaders help themselves and others examine and take on the themes of the Circle of Transition in order to find and utilize the full potential found within themselves and others and prevent stagnation. In order to realize transition, we must therefore connect to secure bases. They enable us to make new discoveries and realize change from a foundation of security and connection.

Building a secure base organization

Secure base leadership is not an instrument, a leadership model or a quick fix. It is a vision on leadership intended to foster a culture of security and trust in organizations in which employees are challenged and stimulated to learn and develop. From there, they can realize performances that exceed expectations.

Secure base leadership requires dedication, patience, a growth mindset focused on learning and development, falling and getting right back up and – above all – practice. It requires commitment from the top and demands that they set the right example. Secure base leaders create learning organizations.

What we see in organizations that embrace and implement secure base leadership is:

- + There is a culture of security and mutual trust.
- + People develop and speak the same language.
- + Leaders and their employees experience more joy and collaboration.
- + There is a culture in which it is okay to make mistakes and the focus is on one key question: what are we learning?
- + Teams and the organization develop their innovative strength.
- + The dialogue between leaders and their employees creates room to discuss complex themes. As a result, fewer people are lost to (long-term) illness and a lack of motivation.
- + The contacts with clients are deepened and enriched.
- + Etcetera

Many organizations are already making use of secure base leadership. Here are some examples:

- + A consultancy firm uses the principles of secure base leadership to improve its internal conversations and, at the same time, deepen and strengthen its client relationships.
- + After a name change, a major corporation discusses the impact of this change with its employees and talks to them about the individual needs that will enable them to (re)connect to the business.
- + An educational institution uses secure base leadership to support lecturers in the crucial role they play in demonstrating how to form bonds and fostering an atmosphere of trust and security in which (young) people feel encouraged to develop themselves to their full potential.
- + A financial institution offers both managers and employees the opportunity to increase their (personal) leadership and resilience in times of change in order to cope with the change more effectively.
- + A logistics service provider allows employees at all levels to further develop their leadership in order to increase the security and openness in the organization.
- + A global maritime service provider highly values safety aboard its vessels. The organization understands that physical safety is improved when employees experience an emotionally safe environment in which there is room for them to learn and develop based on mistakes and successes alike.

De School voor Transitie | #1 expert in Secure Base Leadership

De School voor Transitie is a secure base for people and organizations who want to realize true change. We do this by offering in-company programs, open-enrolment courses and individual coaching.

Our in-company programs are tailor-made to suit the organization. Depending on the client's wishes, we offer a one- or multi-day program during which we and the organization's employees work on the aforementioned themes. These programs are complemented by moments of inspiration and intervision and guidance with implementing the secure base vision into the organization's processes and systems.

This allows us to help organizations get better at forming bonds, engaging in dialogue and showing vulnerability. From there, they are able to utilize the full potential of individuals, teams and the organization as a whole. The open-enrolment courses are centered

around the development of the secure base leadership of both individuals and teams. For example, they offer the opportunity to have a select group of employees further develop their ability to help your organization become a secure base.

Individual coaching can be used to support employees with their personal development – either separately or in addition to one of our programs.

Would you like to know more about how the principles of secure base leadership can contribute to your own, your employees' and your organization's ability to excel?

Take a look at our website:
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De School voor Transitie frequently publishes books and articles about the themes of transition and leadership. In addition to translations of George Kohlrieser's books, The School for Transition actively strives to make translations of the works of international leadership and transition thinkers available on the Dutch market.



*This whitepaper was written with the help of a contribution from Jan van Nederveen.
The layout was realized by Leoniek de Hoop.*