

# Senior Leadership

## An Essential Guide for Actuaries



**Julia Lessing, FIAA, ACC**





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ACTEX Learning

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## About The Author - Julia Lessing



Julia Lessing is a qualified actuary (FIAA) and Associate Certified Coach (ACC) based in Australia. After 20+ years as an actuarial consultant and leader, Julia now helps actuaries and technical professionals develop communication and leadership skills to accelerate their careers. She enjoys creating safe, engaging adult learning environments through her 1:1 coaching, corporate training, cross-company leadership development, and university programs.

Julia is the author of *Aspiring Actuarial Leaders: The Modern Manager's Toolkit*, based on the *Guardian Actuarial Leadership Program* that helps actuaries make the transition from individual technical contributors to team managers. She has delivered the program to cohorts of actuaries from various practice areas and countries around the world, with great feedback and success.

Julia has worked as an actuary in consulting and corporate roles, and in the wider fields of public health and human services. She established Guardian Actuarial in 2015, and has held actuarial educator roles with the Actuaries Institute and Macquarie University, Australia. As an actuary and an International Coaching Federation (ICF) credentialed coach, she is uniquely placed to support your career development.



## Foreword

When I reflect on my own journey through more than 30 years in the actuarial profession – from traditional life insurance roles through consulting, work as a Chief Actuary and eventually three different roles in general management – I wish I'd had a book like this in my hands much earlier.

Don't misunderstand me. I've been fortunate to have had a rewarding career, working alongside talented colleagues and leading capable teams. But there were certainly moments when I would have benefited from the frameworks, insights, and practical tools that Julia has assembled in this book. This is particularly evident when I reflect on times when I may have applied greater sensitivity to others or been more deliberate in my leadership choices.

On a more positive note, one relevant memory springs to mind. Years after what I considered an unremarkable conversation with a colleague, she sought me out to express her gratitude for that specific exchange. I had completely forgotten about it! This was a powerful reminder that as senior leaders, our words and actions carry weight we may not fully appreciate in the moment. The tools and reflective practices in this book can help you become more intentional about the impact you create.

Over my career, I've learned two lessons that I wish someone had told me earlier: Senior leaders don't need to know everything; and your success is primarily driven by the performance of your team rather than your individual technical brilliance. These truths can be uncomfortable for actuaries who have built their careers on being the smartest person in the room when it comes to technical matters. However, embracing them is liberating – and essential for effective senior leadership.

The nature of leadership itself may not have fundamentally changed but the environment certainly has. We now face the challenge of leading teams and influencing stakeholders when person-to-person interaction is reducing in business. The skills required to build trust, motivate teams and drive change in this *offline* landscape are more critical than ever.

This is why I'm delighted to contribute to Julia's second book. My collaboration with Julia to date has taken many forms – sharing content, appearing together on *We Are Actuaries*, co-facilitating workshops and working on broader initiatives with the Actuaries Institute. What I enjoy most is the interactive workshop environment where learning is most clearly evident. There's something special about watching actuaries discover insights about themselves and their leadership in real time.

What makes Julia's approach to this book particularly effective is how she has harnessed the wisdom and experience of many diverse members of her professional network. Throughout this book, you'll encounter perspectives from accomplished senior leaders, each bringing their own unique experiences and hard-won insights. This richness of viewpoints ensures that you will find approaches that resonate with your own values and circumstances.

Speaking of values, one of the most common *aha moments* I've witnessed in our programs is when participants realize that their personal values and strengths form the critical foundation for their leadership. It's not about adopting someone else's leadership style – it's about building an authentic approach that draws on who you truly are.

My hope is that this book makes your learning journey faster, more enjoyable, and more effective. More importantly, I hope it encourages you to be more deliberate in your choices and more willing to engage in self-reflection. The profession needs senior leaders who can navigate complexity with wisdom, lead with authenticity, and create environments where their teams can thrive.

Whether you're aspiring to a senior leadership role or are already navigating its challenges, the frameworks and tools in this book should serve you well. Take your time with them, apply them thoughtfully, and remember that you don't need to have all the answers. You just need to build the right foundations and create the conditions for your success.

Martin Mulcare, FIAA

December, 2025



## Acknowledgements

Having spent most of my life believing I was good with numbers and *less good* with words, I'm still getting used to wearing the title of *Author*, even as I release my second book into the wild!

However, this book is far from a solo achievement. Great things can only ever be achieved through great collaboration. This book, and the program upon which it has been written, would not exist without the generous support and exceptional talent of my valued colleague, mentor and co-facilitator Martin Mulcare. I have learned so much from Martin, ranging from practical facilitation skills to navigating ambiguity and ethical dilemmas. Working with Martin has certainly been one of my greatest career highlights!

Thank you to the senior leaders who allowed me to interview them for the *Guardian Actuarial Senior Leadership Program*. Their expert insights and interviews have been included in this book:

- Amanda Aitken, FIAA
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Thanks also to Frank Grossman, FSA, FCIA, MAAA, for providing valuable feedback on the draft, and to the following actuaries who reviewed the full manuscript:

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- Sheridan Daniels, AIAA
- Jeremy Keating, FIA
- Martin Mulcare, FIAA

Finally, I would like to thank the ACTEX Learning team for enthusiastically supporting the publication of my second book. Special thanks to my fantastically talented and hard-working editor, Yijia Liu, for helping me bring this book to life. Your collaborative leadership has allowed us to work productively and easily across the globe. Thank you!

Julia Lessing, FIAA, ACC

December, 2025





# Introduction

Hello, senior leader, it is great to see you here! What prompted you to read this book?

I'm going to assume you are either aspiring to a senior leadership role or are already working in one, and you are looking for tools and support to help you navigate the inevitable challenges that senior leaders face.

As actuaries, we are trained to make assumptions to help us complete our actuarial analysis and modeling. But as humans, we also make assumptions (just like I did, about why you're reading this book!). As senior leaders we often need to understand the implicit and explicit assumptions made by the people in our teams, organizations, and wider stakeholders to navigate corporate challenges.

As a leadership coach, actuaries often tell me: "I was promoted because of my strong technical skills, but no-one has taught me how to manage a team." In 2021, I developed the Guardian Actuarial Leadership Program to help high-performing actuaries learn the skills to successfully transition to their first management roles. You may have already read my first book *Aspiring Actuarial Leaders: The Modern Manager's Toolkit*, which outlines the theory and key activities from that program.

When we progress into senior leadership roles, our technical actuarial skill set becomes an even smaller part of our role. Senior leaders ask me: "How do I balance the needs of my team while also managing a diverse set of wider stakeholders that don't really understand what we do?". Perhaps you've asked yourself a similar question.

With the support and review from Martin Mulcare, and input from a team of experienced senior actuarial leaders, I built on *Aspiring Actuarial Leaders* and developed the *Guardian Actuarial Senior Leadership Program*. This advanced program equips high-performing actuarial managers with a suite of modern leadership skills to become influential senior leaders who create impact in their teams, organizations and beyond.

This book covers the key theories and activities from the advanced program, packaged as a standalone guide that you can use to help you make the transition to, or feel more confident in your role as, a modern senior leader.

### Who Is This Book For?

This book is designed for high-performing actuaries who are aspiring to, or currently working in, senior leadership roles. The term *senior leader* may be defined in several ways. For the purpose of this book, we have assumed that senior leaders are actuaries who have management experience and are contributing to their organizations at a senior level.

This might include actuaries serving as Chief Actuaries, in C-Suite roles, or in other senior roles in their organizations. It could also include actuaries working in senior roles such as Director or Partner in large consulting firms, and senior executives in other organizations. Senior leaders may have direct reports, possibly even managing managers, or they may have few, or even no, direct reports.

You don't need to have read *Aspiring Actuarial Leaders* to gain value from this book. However, we have assumed that you have already mastered the key skills covered in that book, including time management, delegation, project management and the basics of managing people and teams. You'll find references throughout this book to chapters from *Aspiring Actuarial Leaders* if you want to revisit these concepts.

### How To Use This Book

You may be working through this book by yourself, or it might be the textbook for a leadership development program you are completing. We have designed the book to serve as a resource in either situation.

The book is written in a specific order so that each chapter builds on earlier chapters. If you are a new or aspiring senior leader, you may choose to work sequentially through each chapter of the book in detail. However, if you know the specific areas you'd like to further develop, you might prefer to focus on the relevant chapters that address your specific learning goals.

Building your authentic leadership style requires more than just reading – you will need to practice your new skills. Take a moment to consider how you might do this:

- If you are using this book as part of a leadership development program, what opportunities exist to discuss what you are learning with your fellow participants and facilitators?

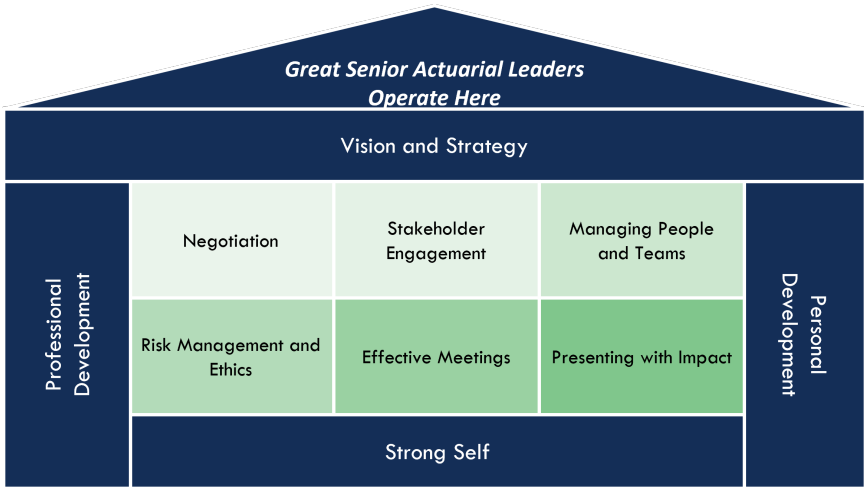
- If you are reading this book on your own, who could you discuss your reflections with? Perhaps a peer or colleague would benefit from working through the materials, and you could plan to meet and discuss your reflections together?

The book also provides links to a range of additional learning resources, such as videos, interviews, tools, and worksheets, to supplement and enhance your learning experience. These resources are designed to reinforce the concepts covered in the book and provide practical examples. If you’re reading a hard copy of this book, you would have received an access code to the digital version, which will allow you to access these links.

We have included a few pages at the end of each chapter to record your reflections and notes. You might also choose to utilize a journal or workbook to complete your activities and capture your reflections as you work through the book.

## Introducing the House of Great Senior Actuarial Leaders Framework

While the art of senior leadership and its suite of associated skills can be vast, complex, and hard to define, we know that many actuaries learn best through frameworks. Throughout this book, we have used the *House of Great Senior Actuarial Leaders* framework to guide you through your learning journey as you build the key foundations and core skills for success.



## Key Foundations

Senior actuarial leaders need strong foundations:

- **Strong Self:** Knowing your values, mission, and personal brand.
- **Vision and Strategy:** Setting a vision for your team and inspiring change through thought leadership and storytelling.
- **Personal Development:** Building resilience and preventing burnout to support career aspirations with non-work pursuits.
- **Professional development:** Building key skills, staying up to date with industry issues, and sustaining your network inside and outside the actuarial profession.

## Core Skills

Once the foundations are in place, senior actuarial leaders need to build advanced skills across the following core areas:

- **Negotiation:** Effective strategies to secure support for your ideas and find a “win-win” solution.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Effective strategies to “manage up” and engage and inform wider stakeholders.
- **Managing People and Teams:** Building, sustaining, and motivating a team of high-performing managers.
- **Risk Management and Ethics:** Practical ways to prevent risks and navigate ethical issues at work.
- **Effective Meetings:** Planning, chairing and participating in meetings, including boards.
- **Presenting with Impact:** Planning and delivering presentations to your team, your organization and beyond.

Each chapter will explore the *key foundations* and *core skills* of the *House of Great Senior Actuarial Leaders* in more depth.

## Learning Outcomes and Self-Assessment

We have identified 12 learning outcomes that are essential for senior leaders. Each chapter of the book addresses a component of the *House of Great Senior Actuarial Leaders* framework, and supports one or two of these 12 learning outcomes.

The key learning outcomes as they map to each of the chapters include:

Chapter	House Topic	Learning Outcomes
1	Strong Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can articulate my values, purpose and what I want to be known for in my career.</li> </ul>
2	Vision and Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can articulate my team's purpose and vision.</li> <li>• I know my preferred thought leadership style and format and I have a plan about what to deliver over the next 12 months.</li> </ul>
3	Negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know my preferred negotiation style and feel confident using this to secure support for my ideas.</li> </ul>
4	Stakeholder Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can identify, engage and communicate with wider stakeholders using a range of techniques.</li> </ul>
5	Managing People and Teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know how to motivate teams and prioritize the workload.</li> <li>• I have a clearly defined operating rhythm for my team, and I can identify and articulate the styles and needs of my team members.</li> </ul>
6	Risk Management and Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have strategies and tools to manage risks and ethical dilemmas at work.</li> </ul>
7	Effective Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel confident with my own suite of tools to prepare for, participate in and chair a range of meetings.</li> </ul>
8	Presenting with Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have a clear approach to help me plan and feel confident to deliver presentations to my team, my wider organization and beyond.</li> </ul>
9	Personal Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have enough resources to stay well while managing my work and non-work commitments.</li> </ul>

Continued on next page

Chapter	House Topic	Learning Outcomes
10	Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I have a system in place to build the skills and professional network I need to support my career plans.</li></ul>

Before you start working through the book, please take a few minutes to assess yourself against each of these learning outcomes and rate your confidence as a senior leader. You can download a [spreadsheet](#) version to track your results now and into the future or use the [table](#) in the Appendix.

## Seeking Feedback from Others

I have yet to meet a person who can see the back of their head without assistance! Successful senior leaders know the importance of being aware of their blind spots, and they have strategies to help increase their awareness.

We have identified 16 assessment statements that correspond to the chapters and learning outcomes of this book. You might consider asking some of your colleagues to rate these statements as they apply to you as a senior leader. This feedback may be confronting, but could be very valuable in helping you see your strengths and identify any development areas. For example, if your colleagues give you a lower rating for the assessment statements about participating in meetings, you might start with Chapter 7 Effective Meetings instead of starting the book at the beginning.

The key assessment statements, as they map to each of the chapters, include:

Chapter	House Topic	Assessment Statements
1	Strong Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I know my colleague’s values and purpose.</li><li>• I know what my colleague wants to be known for in their career.</li></ul>
2	Vision and Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• My colleague can describe their team’s purpose and vision.</li><li>• My colleague can leverage the power of their ideas to influence other people in order to solve a problem.</li></ul>
3	Negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• My colleague is an effective negotiator.</li></ul>

Continued on next page

Chapter	House Topic	Assessment Statements
4	Stakeholder Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My colleague effectively engages with wider stakeholders outside our team.</li> </ul>
5	Managing People and Teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My colleague effectively motivates the team.</li> <li>• My colleague effectively prioritizes workload.</li> <li>• My colleague understands my style and development needs.</li> </ul>
6	Risk Management and Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel confident that my colleague manages risks at work.</li> <li>• I feel confident that my colleague manages ethical dilemmas at work.</li> </ul>
7	Effective Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My colleague is an effective meeting chair.</li> <li>• My colleague is an effective meeting participant.</li> </ul>
8	Presenting with Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My colleague is an effective presenter.</li> </ul>
9	Personal Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My colleague displays strong personal well-being.</li> </ul>
10	Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My colleague engages in ongoing professional development.</li> </ul>

You can download a [spreadsheet](#) version to collate your results from others or use the table in the Appendix.

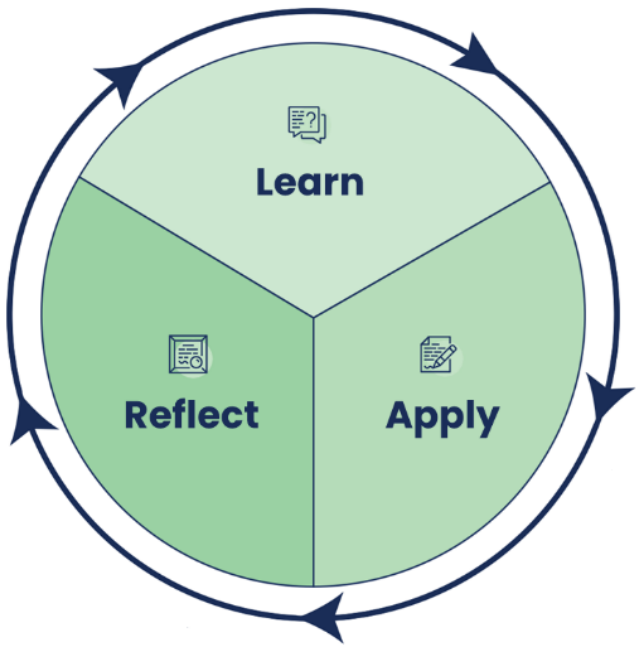
## A Modern Learning Approach

Your actuarial training may have been delivered through traditional linear educational methods of attending lectures, reading and writing exams.

However, these methods may not be sufficient to build senior leadership skills. Modern educational theories, including [Kolb's research](#) on experiential learning, suggest that effective adult education is more cyclical than linear. This involves a process of learning concepts, then applying the concepts, reflecting on our experience and continuing to learn.

This approach supports a more thorough understanding of concepts by learning through experience and embedding new actions. It also allows us to make meaning of these new concepts to more effectively drive behavioral change in ourselves as leaders.

In this book, we use the adult learning coaching model of *Learn > Apply > Reflect*:



Grounded in Kolb's experiential learning theory, this approach emphasizes continual learning, self-assessment, and feedback to help you grow and succeed as a senior leader. Each chapter follows this cycle, starting with the theory and concepts for you to *Learn*, followed by a section of activities for you to *Apply*. There is also a section for you to *Reflect* on your application and consider how you will further practice and refine these skills.

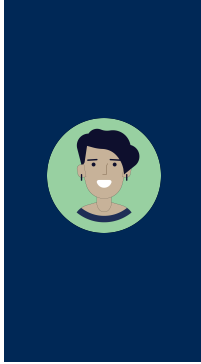


## Introducing Our New Senior Leaders

In *Aspiring Actuarial Leaders* you met Anne Actuary and Mark Manager, who were both recently promoted actuaries working in their first management roles.

In this book, we will follow Anne and Mark as they progress through their careers into senior leadership roles.

Meet Anne and Mark:



**Anne** is thrilled to have reached a career goal she has been working towards, having now been promoted as the Chief Actuary at Amazing Insurance Co.

When she became a manager, Anne built on her reputation for having strong technical actuarial ability and developed her delegation and project management skills, while strengthening her personal well-being. Her new skill set gave her more time to focus on raising her profile to be considered for the Chief Actuary role when it became available.



**Mark** has bought himself a new watch to celebrate his recent promotion to Director at the Fabulous Consulting Co.

When he became a manager, Mark worked hard to complement his strong coding ability by building new skills to better manage his time and develop his team. His stronger organizational and management skills positioned him well for this promotion.

Throughout this book, you will see how Anne and Mark navigate common challenges that senior leaders face.

Let's get started!





# Chapter 1 - Strong Self

## Introduction

Having a strong sense of self is a key foundation for senior leaders. Knowing and understanding your values, strengths, and purpose can help you set goals and make decisions. Being clear and authentic in your leadership style can help you become a more influential and successful leader.

Let us see how Anne balances authentic leadership as the new Chief Actuary.



Anne has a reputation across her organization as being a hard-working, ambitious actuary. This is an accurate reflection of Anne's values and strengths, and she holds her team to a similar standard of performance.

Anne and her partner have discussed having children. While Anne loves the idea of raising a family, she is worried that she wouldn't be able to combine parenthood with the Chief Actuary role she's worked so hard for. However, she prefers to keep her private life to herself, so she never speaks of her concerns with her team or senior colleagues.

In today's weekly 1:1 meeting with Sam, the Head of Valuation, Sam burst into tears and said, "I love this role and this team, but I can't do this anymore. I'm not seeing enough of my children. I'm on my final warning from the childcare center, as I've been late picking them up too many times. This organization isn't working-parent friendly, and I know this isn't a high priority for you. I've accepted another role with Serenity Life."

Anne was shocked by Sam's resignation. She sympathized with Sam but felt powerless, secretly feeling the same way. How will she manage the year-end reporting without Sam? And what can she do to prevent losing more high-performers from her team?

In this chapter you will learn:

- What are values, and how could you describe yours?
- What are strengths, and why is it important to know your strengths and those of your team members?
- How can you build a purpose statement for your career?
- What do we mean by *Personal Brand* and how can you build a strong and successful brand?
- What is meant by vulnerable leadership, and how can you bring vulnerability to work without compromising influence?

This book contains activities and space to apply and reflect on the topics you are learning about. As a strong senior leader, you might also like to think about how you can apply these concepts in your own working life. For example,

- If you want to become known as a visionary leader, you might set yourself a goal to develop and present an example of thought leadership (which we will cover in Chapter 2).
- If you want to build the capacity and culture of your team, you might undertake an exercise to understand and address any gaps or needs in your team.

There is an activity at the end of this chapter that will help you define, test, and market your personal brand.

### Why is having a strong sense of self important for senior leaders?

#### Martin Mulcare says

*“As they say in the safety briefing, fit your own mask before helping others. It is critical for leaders to know themselves before leading others.”*

# Learning Outcomes



The learning outcome associated with this chapter is:

<b>Learning Outcome</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I can articulate my values, purpose and what I want to be known for in my career.</li></ul>
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Take a moment to consider the learning outcome statement above. To what extent do you agree with it? Perhaps you have a clear sense of your values, but aren't clear about what you want to be known for in your career. Use your answer to this question to decide how best to use this chapter.

**Expert advice from a program graduate:**

Senior Actuary Dorothy Cheng graduated from the *Guardian Actuarial Senior Leadership Program* in 2025. She reflects on why this chapter is important for senior leaders.

**Dorothy Cheng says**

*“At first, I couldn’t see why a strong sense of self mattered for leadership. I’ve since realized that without self-awareness and clarity of values, it’s impossible to lead others with consistency, confidence, and authenticity. My values guide how I lead others and navigate life.”*

## Your Values - What Is Important to You?

What do we mean by *values*? The Cambridge Dictionary defines values as:

*“the beliefs people have, especially about what is right and wrong and what is most important in life, that control their behaviour.”*

One way to determine what your values are (or the values of those around you) is to ask “How do you spend your time and/or money?”. This question can often highlight the things that are most important to us.

Understanding your values can empower you to make decisions that are consistent with who you are, which can lead to a more rewarding and purposeful professional career.

Being able to clearly articulate your values can help your career in many ways, including:

- **Choosing roles that are better aligned with your values:** When your work aligns to your values, your contribution each day gives you more than just a salary. For example, if one of your values is the environment, you might choose to work in climate risk, or work for a local company so you can walk or cycle to work. Both options would support your job satisfaction.
- **Making better decisions:** Using your values can help you make better decisions about choosing a job, making a career change, or even navigating decisions in the workplace. For example, if one of your values is work-life balance, you may decide not to apply for a promotion that will involve longer hours and extensive travel.
- **Greater engagement and productivity:** Many people find that when their work aligns with their values they are more engaged, which can lead to increased productivity and higher quality work. For example, if you value innovation and work in a role that allows you to build new models and processes, you’re more likely to feel motivated and engaged in your daily tasks, which can lead to better job performance.
- **Authenticity:** Working in a role that is aligned with your values makes it easier to be an authentic leader, which can lead to better communication, trust, credibility, culture, loyalty and decision making across your team. For example, if one of your values is helping others, your passion for helping will be evident when you are working in a role that involves helping people. Your genuine interest will drive your own development and will be evident to those around you, who will see you as more credible and knowledgeable.

- **Greater career satisfaction:** Building a career path that aligns with your principles and values reduces the risk of feeling unfulfilled or regretful about your career choices. For example, if one of your values is lifelong learning, then choosing roles or extra-curricular activities that allow you to learn new things will provide more career satisfaction than roles where you are not learning anything new.

While your values may be similar throughout your life, their relative importance may change. For example, *money* might be an important value early in your career when you are setting up your home and paying off student loans. However, *time for personal interests* might become more important than money later in your career once you are more financially secure.

Your values exist both at work and at home, but they may show up differently in work and home settings. For example, *caring for others* may be one of your core values. At work, this might show up in the way you communicate and collaborate professionally with your colleagues. At home, you might live this value by running errands or cleaning up after family members, which might not be appropriate actions in a professional setting.

To help you identify your values, you can download an editable version of our [Values Exercise](#).

### Expert advice from an actuary: why it helps to know your values

#### Iain Bulcraig says

*“Managing insurance operations will always have areas of judgment. When there is an important decision to be made with implications for others (e.g., staff or policyholders), I fall back on my values to guide my opinion.”*

## Your Strengths

### What Are Your Strengths and Why Do They Matter?

Understanding and leveraging your strengths can help you build a successful and fulfilling career. Your unique abilities, talents, and skills are like the building blocks of your professional journey, influencing everything from your job performance to your job satisfaction.

Of course, we should not ignore our weaknesses or turn a blind eye when feedback should be provided. We will explore development and feedback in later chapters.

There are several reasons why knowing your strengths is important as a senior leader:

- **Better job performance:** For example, if one of your strengths is data science and coding, having a role where you can apply your knowledge will result in better performance at work than a role where you are in meetings all day.
- **Better job satisfaction:** For example, if you enjoy teaching people, having a role that involves mentoring junior team members would give you better job satisfaction than a role where you don't have anyone to mentor.
- **More confidence:** For example, if you have a role that plays to your strengths, you will be more successful and feel more confident in your work.
- **Helps you to set better goals:** For example, if you are naturally an organized person, you might choose to build on this strength by setting a goal to learn project management skills, which could enhance your career.

### How Do the Strengths of Your Team Relate to You As a Leader?

As a manager, you would have seen how understanding your team's strengths can help you identify which tasks to delegate. As senior leaders, focusing on strengths can increase the motivation and performance of your team.

Dr Gervase Bushe's [research](#) on appreciative leadership reveals that leaders who focus on strengths don't just get better results, they get faster results with less resistance. Traditional *problem-solver* managers spend their energy identifying gaps between current and ideal performance, but exceptional leaders do something different: they track what's already working and amplify it.



This isn't wishful thinking or fluff. Dr Bushe's research shows that when leaders consistently track and fan the flames of what's going well, three things happen:

1. **Teams build momentum:** Instead of living in *gap land* where nothing feels good enough, people operate from a foundation of recognized competence that fosters motivation.
2. **Motivation multiplies:** People who feel valued for their strengths become more receptive to feedback and more willing to stretch into growth areas.
3. **Performance improves organically:** Focusing on building strength rather than compensating for weakness leads to higher-performing teams where *problem areas* start to resolve themselves.

Our beliefs about people actually influence their performance, so if you're scanning for deficits, you'll find them. But if you're tracking for brilliance, you'll amplify that instead.

How will you focus and amplify the strengths of your team to uplift motivation and performance?

To help you identify your strengths, take the free VIA Character [Strengths Survey](#).

### Expert advice from an actuary: why strengths matter

Mike Lubke is an actuary with over 20 years of experience in leading teams in the banking and life insurance domains. He has seen firsthand how powerful focusing on strengths can be:

#### Mike Lubke says

*"My experience is that getting the most out of individuals and teams involves amplifying strengths rather than just trying to address weaknesses."*

# Your Purpose - Why Are You Here?

Why are you an actuary? Why do you go to work? For many of us, the answer might be “to earn money”. But there are a lot of ways we could earn money! Knowing your overarching purpose can help you make better choices at work, lead your team authentically and derive more satisfaction from your work.

It’s not always clear what our purpose is, and our purpose can change over time. Sometimes we know we are fulfilling our purpose because it “feels right”. For many of us, it can help to articulate our purpose and check that our work is aligned with our overall purpose.

So what is your purpose statement? Let’s find out by answering the following four questions:

- 1. Why do you work in your current job?

- 2. What three gifts do you bring to your work?

3. How do you benefit from your work?



4. What impact would you like to have by doing the work you do?



Now complete the following sentence using your answers to the questions above:

I am a [role at work] because [answer to question 1]. I bring [answer to question 2] so that I can [answer to question 3] and [answer to question 4].



*Reproduced with permission. Source: Daphna Horowitz, "Courage to Lead: Leadership Lessons from Kilimanjaro" pp184-185.*

# What About Vulnerable Leadership?

Traditional leadership styles may be characterized by never showing any weakness. However, the concept of *vulnerability* at work was popularized by Brené Brown’s research in 2010.

Modern senior leaders often make the mistake of thinking they are showing vulnerability by oversharing information with their colleagues. However, Brené is clear in her definition of vulnerability:

“I define vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.” Brené Brown

Bringing your *whole self* to work and displaying vulnerability does not mean sharing everything you think and feel with your colleagues. It may be helpful to ask yourself “is what I’m sharing in service of my colleagues?” Sharing some emotion may show your team you are human, but sharing every emotion may confuse your colleagues or reduce their confidence in your abilities as a senior leader.

So how do you balance vulnerability while retaining influence? Actuary and C-Suite leader Iain Bulcraig shares how embracing both vulnerability and influence can help actuaries be more effective in senior leadership.



Chapter 1: Strong Self

Vulnerable and Influential Leadership



## What Vulnerable Leadership Means

Vulnerable leadership involves openly sharing some of your struggles and uncertainties, rather than exclusively projecting perfect competence.

“What I’ve found over the years is if the person who’s more senior in the relationship opens up first, it’s a little bit easier for the other person to open up”, says Iain.

Let’s say your manager shared a story about a time when they felt a lot of pressure and had made a mistake, but learned from it. As a result, you might feel more willing to share a similar issue if it happened to you. As senior leaders, we need to model this kind of transparency so our junior colleagues are less likely to hide their own mistakes.

This approach contrasts with traditional leadership advice. While early-career professionals are often encouraged to only highlight successes, vulnerable leaders take a different path.

When used well, vulnerability can actually demonstrate confidence rather than weakness. When stepping into his first CFO role, Iain asked his team for help and support. This display of vulnerability through his honest admission helped to build trust and created more space for collaborative problem-solving.

## How Actuaries Can Be More Influential in Senior Roles

Senior leaders occupy a unique position that allows us to influence aspects of the business in multiple directions.

Iain identifies three key areas:

1. **Influencing Downwards:** As senior leaders, we can (and should) uphold and model the values of our organizations. We can also influence our teams through living our own values and helping our team members to develop and really understand why they are doing what they do.
2. **Managing Upwards:** This involves having “really honest conversations” with senior leaders, asking “How can I support you? What help do you need, that perhaps I can do for you?”

Iain shares how he once suggested to his manager: “the junior people love to hear from you directly sometimes. Can you, once a quarter or once a month, do a session with them?”

3. **Lateral Influence:** At the senior level, you can often work with peers in risk, claims, legal, and IT to “fix things ourselves without necessarily having to involve all of the really senior leaders.” This can pay dividends in creating a high-performing environment for your team.

At the start of this chapter, we saw how Anne’s values were influencing her team, without even discussing her values and beliefs about working parenthood. However, Anne could have shown vulnerability by sharing her own concerns about balancing work and family, which could have positively impacted her team as well as her own life goals. This could have helped Sam feel more confident to initiate a conversation with Anne, rather than feeling as though finding another job was the only solution.

### The Difference Between Vulnerability and Confidence

Vulnerability and confidence aren’t opposing concepts. Effective senior leaders know how to use both depending on what their team needs in each moment. The most nuanced aspect of leadership involves knowing when to be vulnerable versus when to project pure confidence. Iain acknowledges that this can be a tricky balance: “You can’t be vulnerable all the time and sometimes you just need to show a level of confidence perhaps beyond what you necessarily feel.”

The distinction often comes down to context and responsibility. During high-pressure situations like year-end closes or corporate transactions, senior leaders need to provide certainty to their teams. This includes trusting team members to own their output and its quality, while providing support through the process and escalating issues if they arise.

But this confidence isn’t about hiding reality from your team. You’re not trying to pretend it isn’t hard, but rather taking ownership of the outcome while being honest about the challenges.

The key is having established trust through earlier vulnerability when you need to project confidence during critical moments: “It sounds very flippant, you know, ‘Trust me we’ll get through it’. But if you’ve already got to that place of trust around vulnerability, they will believe you”, says Iain.

Finally, when you can’t share the stress you are feeling with your team, Iain suggests finding a trusted friend or colleague outside your team that you can chat with. This external outlet will allow you to process your concerns without undermining the team’s confidence.

Watch the full interview with Iain [here](#).

## What Is Your Personal Brand As a Leader?

We've explored your values, strengths and purpose statement. We've also looked at how to bring vulnerability into your leadership style. But who are you as a senior leader? What do you stand for? How do others see you?

Anne valued her career progress and was seen as a hard-working non-parent. While this reputation served her well to reach her career goals, it wasn't entirely consistent with her own values. Without realizing it, Anne had developed a personal brand as a high-performing, hard-working actuary who valued career success but didn't value working parenthood.

So what do we mean by the term *personal brand*? Here are three quotes about personal brands:

- "A brand is what people say about you when you are not in the room." – Jeff Bezos
- "Brand yourself for the career you want, not the job you have." – Dan Schawbel
- "If you're not branding yourself, you can be sure others do it for you." – Unknown

Everyone has a personal brand, as it is the way that others see us. This means that even if you don't consciously build one, you will still have a personal brand! Your personal brand can be the answer to the question "why should I work with you?"

Your personal brand can make it easier for you to build the career you want.

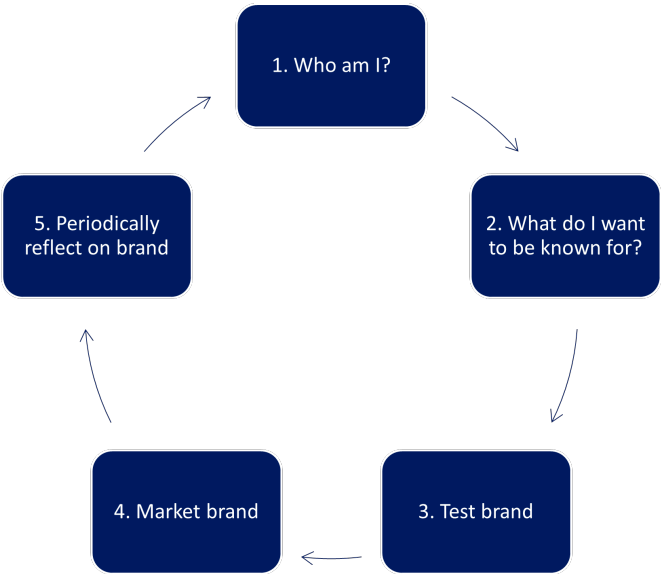
A clear, authentic personal brand can:

- Support (rather than inhibit) your career goals.
- Help those around you see you are ready for a promotion or new challenge.
- Raise your profile and credibility among peers, superiors, teammates, and your industry.
- Help you clearly communicate what makes you different.
- Build stronger loyalty and trust with your teammates and colleagues.
- Create a brand identity that is compelling and engages people, which opens opportunities you may not even know about.

## Activity: Building Your Personal Brand

Now that you’ve worked through the foundations for your *Strong Self*, here’s an activity to help you describe and refine your personal brand now and into the future. We will use a cycle approach because your brand will evolve over your career.

While Anne’s personal brand of being hard-working and ambitious helped her get promoted to Chief Actuary, it isn’t enough for her to be successful as a senior leader.



Over the next few pages, we will step through a process to define, test and reflect on your personal brand.

### Expert advice from an actuary: why personal brand matters

Actuary and Author Catrin Townsend knows the value of a personal brand.

**Catrin Townsend says**

*“Understanding how others perceived me – as technical, reliable, and helpful – was the turning point for me. These were strengths, but not the traits associated with senior leadership. By leaning into my personal brand I could consciously present myself differently. This helped me transition to leading, not just supporting, high-profile projects.”*