

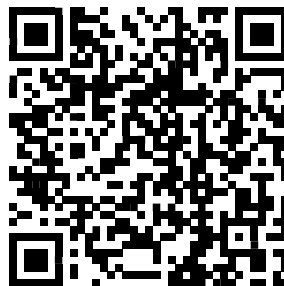
CALL YOURSELF A LEADER

Why capable leadership teams and individuals get in the way of business growth and development— and how a few smart but simple adjustments unlock better judgement, better results and a more enjoyable ride

A white paper for owners, directors and senior leaders of small and medium-sized businesses

Dave Gammon | 2026

Available as a podcast here:



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Executive Summary

Here's an inconvenient truth the leadership industry won't tell you: most commercial leaders do not need fixing.

After more than twenty years inside SMEs, I've learned the real constraint isn't capability. It's pollution of thought, communication and action.

When we feel like we lack confidence, resilience and competence (or when we feel more confident and competent than we actually are), our capability clocks off, we end up getting in our own way, slowing down or arresting progress towards results without realising it.

Leadership challenges bite harder in an SME than anywhere else. There are fewer layers between a leader's judgement and its consequences — a bad call on price, people or cash doesn't get absorbed by the corporate machine; it hits the bank account by Friday.

When we find ourselves struggling, we engage in the question

What do I need to do to be a better leader and have commercial success?

This sends good people into beige hotel conference rooms with flipcharts, personality profiles and lukewarm fizzy water. Some of it is useful, but a lot of it is a waste of time and budget.

The better question is:

What stops me accessing my highest performance potential when it matters?

Nobody needs a personality transplant. Nobody needs more noise. A few intelligent adjustments, made in the right place, change a remarkable amount — sharper judgement, better decisions, and, more often than the industry admits, a leader who starts enjoying the job again.

My work is subtractive, not additive: strip away what's in the way, rather than bolt on one more technique.

You didn't take on a leadership role in an SME to spend your life firefighting, sitting through someone else's PowerPoint on "leadership behaviours," or filling in a personality profile that tells you what you already suspected about yourself. You did it to build something, fix something, prove something, or make some money — and, ideally, enjoy the ride while you're at it.

This paper is for owners, directors, and senior leaders who quietly suspect that the thing holding them back isn't a skills gap that the next course will close. It's closer to home than that. Over the next few pages, I'll make the case for what it actually is, and what to do about it — no flipcharts required. Enjoy 😊

Dave Gammon

Commercial Leadership coach



The challenge isn't what you think it is

. Commercial leaders do not need nearly as much fixing as the industry would wish or would have them believe. It's an inconvenient truth for the world of leadership development and coaching.

After twenty years working with owners, directors and managers in small and medium-sized businesses¹, the most consistent constraint is not capability or potential.

It's pollution of thought, communication and action.

Our leadership capability and potential shrink when we become frightened, defensive, overloaded, desperate to be liked, attached to being right, trapped inside an old story about who we are, or simply looking at situations with the wrong attitude or from the wrong altitude.

We are more capable than we think we are, but instead of confidently thinking and acting, we

- avoid conversations we should be having
- confuse assumptions with facts.
- make complicated plans to avoid simple decisions.
- find reasons not to do 'difficult' actions

Then, when we don't get the expected results, we either carry on as we are (thinking that this is just the way it is) or we look to coaching, training, conferences and books for solutions.

The next thing we know, we are in a bland hotel room with PowerPoints, flipcharts, personality profiles, lukewarm fizzy water and overenthusiastic presenters, seeking the answer to

"What do I need to do to be a better leader and have commercial success?"

I suppose this is better than nothing, but it is still money and time spent answering the wrong question.

¹ And a further twenty years of my own leadership wins, losses, strengths and struggles in the corporate world

Something closer to the right question is

"What stops me accessing my highest performance potential when it matters?"

This question has shown up throughout my coaching career, both in my work with a coaching franchise (where it took the form of disagreement with the framework) and in my work as an independent coach and thinker. It's a thread running through the four books and over three hundred articles/videos I have produced.

The language has changed, but the question my work asks hasn't:

How can I help perfectly capable human beings see more clearly, make better judgements, connect with other people and deliver useful action?

Call Yourself A Leader is the current and maybe the final synthesis of this work.²³ It is not intended to be another new set of commandments about leadership or a guidebook to business growth. That would be more noise in the system.

It's a set of stories and ideas to help commercial leaders reflect on how they think and act.

But before we get into the what and how, let's think about why.

Why this? Why now?

Obviously, leadership matters, but in an SME its importance is amplified tenfold.

There are fewer layers between a leader's judgement and the results they create. A poor decision about price, recruitment, a major customer, cash, investment or structure doesn't get hidden in the corporate machine. It quickly hits the bank account, the order book, the office, or the shop floor.

² I may well have said that after finishing each book, though.

³ You can get a copy of 'Call Yourself a Leader' at www.sixthsensebusiness.com/book. If you answer the question posed on the order form, I can point you to the most immediately useful chapters for you.



This doesn't just affect a company. It affects the nation.

Successive Governments (of all political persuasions) wax lyrical about the importance of SMEs to the UK economy and state the uncontroversial idea that the quality of leadership affects productivity and growth.[1][2] This is supported by research from the World Management Survey, which shows strong links between management practices and organisational performance across companies worldwide.[3]

Yet, if leadership and management matter so much, why does leadership development get missed off the budget or culled at the first sign of an economic wobble?

I don't blame the companies, as in so many cases their investment fails to produce lasting changes at a company or individual level.

It starts in the wrong place; downstream from where transformation happens.

Much coaching and training teaches behaviours and introduces models and tools for business growth, mindset, motivation, communication, performance management, and accountability. Now, if you throw enough mud at the wall, some will stick, so some of this might be useful and interesting. But most of it is just unnecessarily adding to the noise, confusion and sense of incompetence felt by the learner.

Even if the ideas stick, we can still

- know the correct technique for a difficult conversation and avoid the conversation
- understand the need for delegation perfectly and interfere with every decision because control feels safer
- understand active listening yet spend the entire conversation waiting for the other person to stop talking.
- write a beautiful strategy and allow the next morning's inbox to destroy any chances of executing it.

***Knowledge is not capability.
Knowing good leadership practices
does not guarantee we will bring
them along for the ride, especially
under pressure.***

Permanent behavioural change requires a different approach.

In this paper, I make the case for starting upstream with the leader's perception, identity, judgement and the conditions that make useful action more or less likely. This not only replaces the need for hours of coaching/training, but also enables a better training and coaching experience, making them more valuable and useful.⁴

It starts with three important ideas

1. It's not the situation. It's how you show up
2. We are all more than we think we are
3. Business is simple. People make it complicated

It's not the situation. It's how you show up.

If you have watched two directors leave the same meeting with completely different accounts of what just happened, you'll know this is more than mere philosophy.

One thinks the customer is excited. Another thinks they are politely backing away. One sees an employee with an attitude problem. Another sees somebody who has stopped trusting their manager. One sees a bold investment. Another sees an emotional attachment to an idea that should have been binned months ago.

We think we observe reality as it is and make rational decisions about it.

It doesn't work like that. Human beings are messy.

We create unique interpretations of complex situations and then act as though these are reality. This 'sense-making' is influenced by who we think we are, our previous experiences, social interactions and the things we choose to notice/ignore.[4]

The latest thinking in neuroscience suggests our perception is not a simple camera lens recording events. It's the brain making predictions about what is happening and then using sensory evidence to adjust and update the picture.[5]

This doesn't mean that reality is the stuff of glittery unicorns. It truly isn't. The customer either buys or does not, and cash flow stubbornly remains a matter of fact.

It simply means that each of our unique versions of reality is mediated by the person doing the looking, and that matters enormously.

⁴ In fact, it is the work before the course or program.



Before you improve the decision, it is worth examining the decision-maker.

In Call Yourself a Leader, I refer to this as calibration, e.g., how well calibrated is the person relative to the situation? Calibration affects how each of us shows up and our judgement.

Are you showing up as the curious, confident, commercially grounded version or the threatened version trying to protect status, certainty, belonging or an old identity?

The same person can swing between both positions fifty times, often before lunchtime.

There is no single correct leadership style or commercial decision. Context changes. People change. Markets change. Perspectives change. Priorities change.

The question is not “Am I a good leader or the right type of leader?”

The question is “What version of me is showing up in this situation and which one gives us the best chance of creating the outcomes that matter?”

We are all more than we think we are

To explain this practically, let's turn to one of the less aesthetically pleasing but yet useful metaphors in Call Yourself a Leader: the diamond, the horseshit and the nail varnish.

Underneath your accumulated layers of experience, identity and thinking is a diamond: not a mystical perfect self, but the most resourceful version of you that is available.

Life adds the layers. Some are valuable: knowledge, scar tissue, technical competence and lived experience, and some are horseshit: stories we tell ourselves, untested assumptions, fears dressed up as facts, and beliefs about what a ‘proper leader’ is supposed to look like.

To try and keep the best of us on public display, we paint nail varnish over the horseshit. We choose a polished persona because we think leadership requires us to appear certain, impressive, invulnerable or permanently in control.

Whilst well-intentioned, most leadership coaching and development adds more horseshit and nail varnish. It can leave us feeling incompetent, dependent on others for

motivation, and with a ton of new ideas to try to assimilate into an already overwhelmed mind.

This is the distinction in Call Yourself a Leader. My work is subtractive, not additive. It asks what can be removed, questioned or loosened so that the person's existing unfiltered judgement and capability becomes available.

This is not naïve self-belief. You cannot scrape away your limiting beliefs and suddenly understand a balance sheet, run a production system or negotiate a complex contract. Competence matters, and sometimes the answer is a new skill. But often the answer is first to stop doing something or to notice that the problem you have been heroically solving is not actually the problem.

This has been referred to as double-loop learning. Organisations and individuals sometimes need to do more than correct their actions; they need to question the assumptions and governing beliefs that produced the action in the first place.[6]

That is close to the heart of Call Yourself a Leader.

Business is simple. People make it complicated.

This sentence has accompanied my coaching journey since 2010 when it first slipped out of my mouth. It has got me into a few arguments because some business leaders can't get past the idea that they are ‘experts’ with a mystical ability to read the future so that every decision they make is a calculated act of genius.⁵

At the centre of every commercial leadership decision or action is **responsible value creation**: generating profit by delivering value to customers, owners, employees, and the wider communities in which the business operates. The very nature of this idea means that we are constantly making trade-offs and guesses in pursuit of results.

I'm not saying business is easy (simple and easy are different things). Running an SME can be brutal. Markets move. Customers behave strangely. Competitors arrive. Technology changes. Good people leave. Bad debts happen. Governments discover new rules and taxes.

What I am saying is that the basic commercial questions underlying the details are easy to understand.

⁵ Humility in the face of uncertainty is a valuable leadership trait



Who are we creating value for? What do they value? Why should they choose us? Can we deliver it reliably? Do we generate enough margin and cash? Are we organised in a way that makes our desired outcomes more likely?

It's simple.

Then human beings arrive.

We add ego, fear, loyalty, politics, ambiguity, optimism, pessimism, status, history and the astonishing ability of six intelligent adults to end up with seven different understandings of what was agreed in a meeting.

Mechanical problems in a company are often rooted in human behaviour. A pricing problem may be a confidence problem. A delayed project may look like a planning problem but can be an ownership problem. A 'difficult employee' may be a relationship that has been badly managed for two years. A strategy problem may be that nobody has decided what they want.

I am always coaching a person. Not a problem. Not a situation. Not a company.

It is because of this that the distinction between 'business coaching' and 'leadership development' has always felt artificial to me. The business and the people running it are part of the same thought-based system.⁶ I prefer to think of it as Commercial leadership coaching.

The job is to help leaders think and act in ways that create ideas and strategies that deliver consistency, stability and growth.

That is where just six questions come into play.

Creating performance breakthroughs

The more I coached and explored what underpinned coaching, the more obvious it became to me.

The juice was not in the content of the conversation but in the shifts going on underneath it. If only I could bottle the thing that made those happen.

But each person is unique and has a unique way of viewing the world, so it follows that the key to creating big shifts in them is also unique. What I have found is that transformations came from one or more of just six questions; provided they were asked with intention and

that I was willing to hold the person in the space where change could happen.⁷

I tailor the wording of these questions to suit the client and the situation, and over time they have developed, but the underlying structure hasn't. They are deliberately simple but not simplistic.

Who are you? What do you want? What is going on out there? Who is on the bus? What do we need to do? Is it working?

They can be asked at multiple levels: an individual, a leadership team, a project or an entire company.

Who are you? This forces us to examine the person making the judgement: their identity, state, assumptions, fears, confidence, competence, and the stories they operate by.

What do you want? At first this can seem embarrassingly obvious until a precise answer, coupled with 'why', is sought. Clear outcomes create positive tension and direction. Vagueness leads to the wrong activity or inaction.

What is going on out there? This distinguishes the world of fact and data from our story about the world, whether we are exploring the marketplace, customer experience, economics or the structure of the company.

Who is on the bus? Meaningful outcomes require other people, and those people have aims, fears, motivations, capabilities and interpretations of their own. These need to be aligned to create motivation and performance.

What do we need to do? This is where the rubber hits the road. It converts insight into choices, conversations, responsibilities and clean action. It also asks the neglected question: what do we need to stop?

Is it working? Uncertainty requires humility. Decisions are informed guesses, not divine revelation. We act, observe, learn and adjust.

Each step matters. Plans that connect intended action to real situations increase the likelihood that intentions actually become action.^[7]

The six questions create a repeatable structure and a common language for strategic and leadership thinking at the company, team, and individual levels.

⁶ What is a business if you remove the collective brain power participating in it?

⁷ This is not easy, as most people subconsciously resist and avoid change



This turns commercial and strategic thinking from a once-a-year workshop into an in-built thinking habit which leads to lasting behaviour change.[8]

The six questions, when asked with genuine curiosity and skill⁸, help companies and individuals see their horseshit (the stories, assumptions, beliefs, and unwritten rules) so adjustments can be made to move forward in exciting and useful ways.

Sounds easy, eh?

The challenge is that everyone operates inside their own thinking. Sometimes this is really useful, but we also mistake assumptions for facts, stories for truth and habitual behaviours for free-willed action.

The stories we tell ourselves and each other are carefully curated and edited so our decisions (good and bad) can be justified, and we are very good at proving ourselves right.

Collectively, these stories and beliefs become the culture of the team or company. This isn't deliberate arrogance or dishonesty; it is human neurology.

We don't give up our horse shit easily. There is comfort in the familiar, so those stories, beliefs, assumptions, and rules are not easily dislodged on your own.

We are all experts in rationalising our own thinking and behaviour.

The wisdom underpinning this idea is timeless, from early Socratic ideas of disciplined questioning through to cutting-edge neurology. Our understanding and approach may be evolving, but they all point towards a similar conclusion: people make better judgements when somebody helps them examine the thinking that produced those judgements in the first place.

That is where I come in...

⁸ That, my friends, is where I, as the Jester/Coach, come in

The Jester/Coach – Your secret competitive advantage

I've struggled to define what I do in ways that help people quickly grasp and buy into it. Coaching doesn't quite cut it because there are as many flavours of coaching as there are coaches.

If you have tried coaching, are being coached now or hate the very thought of being coached, you'll have a sense of what it looks and feels like.

That's very different from what I do.

Coaching is super useful, but its value goes way beyond asking questions and trying to stay one book ahead of your client.⁹ High-performance coaching is not about mindset, tools, strategies, and techniques. That's just adding to the noise we are wrestling with. My approach is simpler.

I hold a mirror up to you, your team and your company through which you can explore your thinking and perspectives. The mirror allows you to spot the pollution where:

- assumptions and guesswork are being used as facts
- things are not being said
- fear is disguised as prudent caution
- ego is obscuring competence (or lack of competence)
- there is action without progress

My role is to help you reveal and remove the horseshit and the nail varnish.

I'm not easily fooled. In addition to my coaching skills, I bring a rare breadth and depth of commercial and operational understanding.¹⁰ I understand everything from the balance sheet, through operations, sales and marketing and people management.

But there is something else...

My work requires a level and type of exploration that can get uncomfortable, for both parties.

We've carried our stories and beliefs for a long time to the point where some feel part of our very being. They won't move aside for fresh thinking without a fight. When dealing with transformational change, emotions are easily

⁹ An adage from the coaching franchise I started this journey with.

¹⁰ Twenty years in Corporate Audit and Business Operations kinda do that to you



triggered (anything from anger to tears). Many coaches back away at the very moment the client needs their feet held to the fire (metaphorically in most cases).

I have a secret weapon in my armoury: irreverence. This is another layer to my work, and it's probably the bit people remember most about encounters with me.

The Jester.

The court jester was not merely an entertainer. He could say what others couldn't (or wouldn't dare), call out ego, reveal contradiction, and make an uncomfortable truth easier to hear, using laughter.

Status often distorts information, so leaders are often the last to discover what everybody else already knows once teams have learned which truths are welcome and which are not.

Humour, used carefully, lets us look at ourselves without feeling the need to immediately defend what we think.

The skill of coaching and jestering (with a bit of philosophy thrown in) is to bring curiosity, irreverence and the courage to ask the question everyone has been politely walking around.

Sometimes leaders need profound psychological insight and other times they need someone to say "Why the f*ck are we wasting time with this?"

These are the moments that transform results, performance, companies and leaders.

You don't work with me to tell you what to do or to violently agree with you. You work with me to see your business—and yourself—with a level of clarity that is impossible to achieve from inside it.

My only loyalty is to clearer judgement, better conversations and the responsible creation of value, making my work the most valuable competitive advantage any business can quietly possess.

A few adjustments can change a great deal.

If deep personality deficits caused leadership problems, transformation would be slow, expensive, and uncertain. The constraints I see are much smaller and more movable.

A leader

- asking a better question instead of giving advice.
- distinguishing fact from interpretation.

- defining an outcome before creating a plan.
- who stops rescuing a colleague and instead makes their level of ownership explicit.
- finally saying exactly what they want to achieve and then delivering it.
- using monthly meetings to start making decisions instead of ceremonial theatre.

None of these sound revolutionary, but small changes upstream create large changes downstream.

Leadership is a system of moments. A different perception changes a judgement, which changes a conversation, which changes action.

Repeated actions alter relationships, structures, results and eventually culture.

Recent economic research reinforces the importance of leadership quality rather than seeing it as a nice-to-have, soft issue. Work by Bloom, Sadun, Van Reenen and others finds substantial variation in management practices between firms and links stronger management capability with productivity and organisational performance.[3][10]

Recent work also suggests management capability affects a firm's ability to adapt and reallocate effectively, not merely its steady-state efficiency.[11]

I don't claim to guarantee business results. That's not sensible because markets and luck have a big hand in that.

The claim is more modest and more useful: better perception, better judgement, stronger connection and cleaner execution improve the quality, adaptability and speed of decisions from which results emerge.

So what might you be missing?

Perhaps the most useful thing this paper does is not give you more models and tools to remember. It should make you start thinking differently and notice more. Perhaps:

- your business does not have the problem you think it has
- your team does not need motivating in the way you have been trying to motivate them.
- the strategy is not unclear; perhaps nobody is sufficiently committed to the choices it requires.
- the 'difficult' person makes perfect sense when viewed from where they are standing
- the obstacle is surmountable



Perhaps it is in the relationship between what you want, what is happening, how you are interpreting it, the people you need, and what everybody is doing next.

It is not what is happening. It is how you are showing up in what is happening.

The central invitations of Call Yourself A Leader are not to

- become somebody else's idea of a great leader
- work on a bigger list of management competencies
- overanalyse your personality.

It is to see more, notice interference, make better choices, connect with people, take committed action, measure, adjust and go again; a little wiser each time.

Results aren't the only benefit....

Leadership might become exciting again.

Most people in leadership roles in SME's did not start or join a business because they wanted to spend their lives administering problems.

They wanted to build something. Improve something. Create something distinctive. Give customers something worth buying. Give people worthwhile work. Make money. Have freedom. Prove something. Enjoy themselves.

Usually, it's an untidy mixture of all of the above.

But as the business grows, leadership becomes about firefighting, meetings, people issues, and endlessly fixing things.

It does not have to stay that way if you choose to change your attitude and your altitude.

Attitude changes experience. If you have low self-belief in yourself, lack confidence, resilience and courage, you'll see leadership at best as a chore and at worst as something you actively avoid getting involved in.

When you see yourself as capable and able to deal with whatever situations get thrown at you, leadership becomes a cycle of personal growth, and you experience it differently.

Altitude changes perspective. Leaders in SME's have to be able to move through different levels of perspective.

At ground level, you can see yourself and the other people doing the work, and what needs to start, stop, or continue for the larger possibility to become real. The danger here is you end up involved in too much 'doing'.

From helicopter level, you can see the organisation you are building: its direction, structure, relationships and the 'art' that makes it distinctly yours.

At the satellite level, you can see the market, the opportunity, and the real value the business could create.

These are the perspectives we explore in the Leadership Laboratory experience. This one-day session enables you (and your entire leadership team, if you wish) to step away from the hamster wheel and reflect on the bigger picture and how you show up as leaders in it.

The aim is not to send you home with a list of ideas you won't have time to implement, or to bombard you with things you think you need to know. That's just adding to the noise and overwhelm.

It is to help you see yourself, your team, and your company differently; find what's getting in the way of progress; and make a few intelligent adjustments in judgement, behaviour, and organisation that will open possibilities that were there all along.

You do not need a personality transplant. You need to see something of yourself that you have been missing.

It might be...

- A story about yourself that is no longer useful.
- A conversation you have been avoiding.
- An assumption nobody has challenged.
- A commercial reality hidden behind the numbers.
- A decision you are deferring.

A few small adjustments here change everything.

And that is where leadership becomes interesting, challenging and fun again.

None of this work requires you to become someone else. It asks something realistic: the willingness to look clearly enough at yourself, your team and your business to spot what's quietly in the way. Scrape off enough horseshit, wipe away enough nail varnish, and the diamond that was always there can emerge. Less noise. Less pollution. A leader who can see clearly, judge well, connect with their



people, act — and remember why they wanted to do this in the first place.

For details of the next **Leadership Laboratory** or how you can work with Dave in-house, email him at dave@sixthsensebusiness.com

A copy of the book Call Yourself a Leader is available at www.sixthsensebusiness.com



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About this paper

Call Yourself a Leader is the mature synthesis of forty years of commercial leadership, coaching, writing and work with SME owners, directors and managers.

The approach combines personal calibration, commercial sense-making, human connection and disciplined execution around one purpose: helping leaders create responsible, sustainable value while remaining recognisably themselves.

