



# The Soil of Leadership

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## The Summary

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### INTRODUCTION

We seek greater connection to ourselves, our communities, our work, and our place in the world, yet these very same contexts are usually rife with disconnections—forces that drive us away and push us apart. This is a book about leadership practice that works to unify and connect.

One of the most important lessons of my life has been that transformational learning can, and perhaps should, be as much about new perspectives reshaping an understanding of the familiar, as an exploration of the previously unknown. Your most important journeys need not trace the art of a prolonged hero's quest, but rather

can focus most fruitfully on what is right beneath your feet. This is why I will invite you to place your hands onto the soil that supports and nurtures you, so you can learn to see anew what is under the familiar ground on which you walk. Put another way, let's dig where we stand.

### Tools for Growth

In these pages I share with you some of the most significant leadership lessons I absorbed while learning to be a sustainable farmer and organizational leader.

So many of the leadership and management ideas presented to us as skills actually are little more than coping

mechanisms, aimed at getting you through (or past) challenging points as quickly as possible so you can produce more efficiently, or just more quickly. These are not, in my estimation, true skills. They are certainly not skills for growth that will help you become a more capable, fulfilled, generative, and inspired leader. The tools I share here have helped leaders transform their perspectives in ways that unleash a deeper reserve of creative and generative potential.

## Evolving Leadership Development

What I call Leadership 1.0 is a product of traditional education methodologies where a teacher (the expert) provides the student (a trainee) with information that presumably will help to advance their lives. Leadership 2.0 recognizes the importance of networks and human relationships to advance social change and prioritizes experience and exposure. The most important skill is not making the connections but knowing how to sift through them, and discerning what is most useful.

Leadership 3.0 grounds the leader's growth in their lived reality. The most transformational work is at the intersection of retreat and engagement. When leaders are able to name, articulate, and reframe their realities, it opens up a new awareness that is powerful and life changing. This generative force produces leaders who are inspired and reconnected to what matters. Leadership 3.0 gives leaders the capacity to maximize the skills gained through Leadership 1.0 and Leadership 2.0.

Needless to say, the Soil of Leadership is firmly rooted in Leadership 3.0. But the through line of this diverse work is simple: your fruits are only as strong as your roots. How do you cultivate the conditions for transformation in your workplace, your community, your leadership, your life?

## CHAPTER 1: THE TRIP FROM DIRT TO SOIL

Soil is dirt transformed. Before I learned how to farm, I didn't know the difference. I could take a handful of earth, but it held no real meaning to me. I had no relationship with it nor connection to it. It was just a pile of dirt.

### My Roots

I am a yonsei, a fourth-generation Japanese American, and I grew up in a small beach community in southern California. It was not until I developed an interest in farming and the intervention between food and community building that I would chart a route to find my roots.

### The Arrival

I responded to an ad for an environmental organization in Japan. A month later I got a voicemail: "Dr Takekuma warmly welcomes you to live, work, and learn on the farm." I faced a steep learning curve over the next year.

### Growing Soil

Dr. Takekuma walked me out of the farmhouse the first morning and into the nearest field. He turned to me and asked: "What is the difference between a conventional farmer and a sustainable farmer?" This question would change the trajectory of my life. His answer? "The conventional farmer grows plants, and the sustainable farmer grows soil."

### Plant-Based vs. Soil-Based

I look back now at that decade of my life and recognize that, since that moment, my life's work has been shaped by the central theme of cultivating the conditions for transformation.

In plant-based propositions, leaders are trying to get output from the things they see. How to increase performance. How to improve metrics. Soil-based inquiries offer more depth and meaning—such as how to build trust and connection between people—but are discounted as “soft,” with little awareness of the kind of commitment and resources necessary to achieve them. How shortsighted a farmer would be to cultivate trays of seeds without the least concern with where they would be transplanted.

## CHAPTER 2: SOIL BUILDING

If you’ve ever had your hands in deep loamy soil, you will never forget it. And the same thing can be said for generative community. And, once you truly experience it, you will never forget it. We feel connected, seen and supported, creative. Accepted, accountable, and inspired to take action. This kind of community is an invitation into the wondrous side of the collective human experience that anchors us in meaning and purpose.

### A Handful of Soil

One of the enduring myths of leadership is that some people are born leaders. But that’s a notion of leadership that is driven by charisma. In fact, transformative leadership comes from doing the work required to develop fluency within your given context. Connecting to the soil is about plugging into a deeper level of awareness and not losing sight that yes, it’s about plants or it’s about the things you do, but even more importantly, it is the context in which you do them and the care with which they are done.

### Rototiller Wisdom

By the second week on Dr. Takekuma’s farm, growing soil was no longer an abstraction. I could feel with my hands that it was an embodied, and practical, strategy

for fostering life. It felt that soil could do and grow just about anything. Later that day I posed a question to Dr. Takekuma: “How did this soil become like this?” He offered yet another answer that would stop me in my tracks: “It is because of time, space, and relationships.”

### Time + Space + Relationships

Time is knowing when to plant, thin, stake, prune, harvest, cover crop, and rest. Space is leaving sufficient distance between plants, keeping competitors in their own corner of the garden, and marking off paths. Relationships are the dynamics between soil microorganisms and creatures, between species of companion plants, the ways in which plants attract insects, and the interplay between the plants you cultivate intentionally and the ones that volunteer a bit too eagerly. So what happens when we make the time and space for relationships with ourselves, with others, and with our work? How does building soil improve and grow our leadership?

### Relationships with Ourselves

When we make the time and space to tend a closer relationship to ourselves, we develop a greater self-awareness and learn to reflect with purpose and intent. When we build soil in our organizations and relationships, it is critical to first focus on cultivating a generative, safe, and challenging space of learning and growth, including for ourselves. Soil building requires us all to do our best to hold an open heart and mind.

### Relationships with Others

When we make the time and space to tend a closer relationship to others, we develop relationships that have greater alignment, whether we are serving someone, or transacting or transforming with them. When we give time and space to relationships, we do the hard, slow work of getting to know others and letting ourselves be

known—not as full, complete beings baring our souls, but in a way that’s fitting to the context, whether we are transacting, conversing, or cocreating.

### Relationships with Our Work

When we make the time and space to tend a closer relationship to our work, we can think and plan from a place of purpose and intent. When I say work, I am referring not just to compensated labor. I am pointing to the things that we create and build, the fire that drives us to act and ignites our sense of calling. Within leadership, it is vital that people tend to their fires and, more specifically, create the time and space necessary for them to grow and thrive.

### Compost Happens

A compost pile metabolizes best when we tend to both the balance and the diversity of materials it is being fed. Such attention does not in itself yield transformation and change (that is the role of the digesting bacteria living in the guts of the worms we coax into the pile). But it does catalyze a metabolic process, transforming a collection of somethings into a unifying thing: the Soil of Leadership, where anything you plant grows. The leadership lesson presents itself loud and clear: reflection and action are two modalities, and that distinction should overshadow the myriad things that make up each one. We best reflect when we gather as many diverse materials as possible, turning them over in every possible way, to inform the kind of action we should take (which sometimes means taking no action at all).

## CHAPTER 3: INQUIRY

Everywhere I looked, there was more to see. Soil was not dirt but a conduit and context for relationships. Insects were not pests but valued community members contributing to the greater cause. Carrots were not just snacks but—with a little patience—a source of flowers

whose nectar served as a beacon to those helpful insects. Weeds were not a permanent feature on our to-do list but an indication of something going on beneath the surface. Regularly reaching back to the soil breathes life into your foundational capacities, amplifies your sense of empathy, and expands your ability to look for potential problems or opportunities. And it starts with inquiry.

### The Weeds of Inquiry

In leadership and management, what appears to be a weed may be the team member who has been labeled as a “troublemaker” or “problem,” or the fixed explanations of why there are struggles within certain business collaborations. When we stay longer in the place of inquiry, suspending judgement, if even for a brief time, we discover new ways to see things around us and what they may be telling us. It is what helps us get under the surface of what we can see and closer to the roots of how we know.

### A Different Kind of Inquiry

We all ask questions. A leader is told to ask good questions, hard questions, to challenge and inspire their team to go the extra mile, achieve the audacious goal. Asking questions is part of the job description. Inquiry lives at the very heart of the Soil of Leadership, and it is not only a state of being but an open passage to discovery that all leaders need to be able to access if they wish to cultivate a deeper connection to themselves, to others, and their work. So often in our work, in our leadership, or even just more generally in our lives, we are living in a world of reaction. Our impulse is simply to pull the weed.

### Floating Rocks

As an adult, I don’t question gravity. This is because every time I have tested gravity, my expectation has been confirmed. If I were to take a rock and drop it, and

it floated up into the air, that unexpected result would cause me to question the very foundation of my beliefs. The moments in leadership that push on toward inquiry are rarely as startling as a floating rock. But next time you see something that just doesn't make immediate sense, resist the urge to drag a rock back down to earth. Get curious.

### Growing Pickles

Until someone asked me “When will there be pickles?” I took it for granted that everyone knew where pickles came from. To be honest, I never even considered that might be something someone didn't know. But by asking myself why he thought that, I got two things: I got insight into my own assumptions, and I got the opportunity to come closer to my friend, to foster rather than compromise our connection. In your workplace, do people feel comfortable asking “When will there be pickles?” Do you feel comfortable asking questions for yourself? Are there assumptions that prevent you from understanding how someone could not know all the things you know?

### Staying in Inquiry

So the key to staying in inquiry is to slow things down and shift from being reactive to being more reflective, bending and reshaping our relationship to time so that it better serves our leadership and decision-making. And because time is a core ingredient in the process of soil-building, it is vital that we have the tools to slow down.

## CHAPTER 4: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

But as can be the case, I was becoming blissfully unaware of how my heightened emotional state was narrowing my perspective on discovery. While love was wonderful, I would soon learn that this emotional state

was not a destination, but that it lived most dynamically when equally fed by a clear intent to stay open and listen deeply.

### The Language of Daikon

We are hardwired to seek understanding. As our familiarity with cultures, words, and gestures starts to grow, so, too, does the drive toward clarity of meaning. In more simple terms: When it comes to language, the more I think I understand, the more assumptions I make about what I am hearing. And when I'm in this mode, my interpretations tend to be way off. The real gift that experiences have to offer lies beneath the surface, outside of immediate sight. And to access that gift requires time and space—two of our key ingredients in soil building—which I have learned can be done effectively by accessing a familiar tool: reflection.

### Reflection

We are born to reflect. To consider and reconsider things that happen in our lives is not only something that we all do; it is quite literally a distinguishing feature of our humanity. In the context of leadership, reflection has long been assigned to the realm of “soft” skills and thus discounted, under-appreciated, and under-examined as a tool for both strategy and innovation. Effective and connective leadership depends on Reflective Practice. Reflective practice requires taking multiple steps back to begin to identify the unconscious and conscious beliefs, assumptions, and patterns that underlie our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

### The Reflection Tree

I find it helpful to explore Reflective Practice through a model. The representation of a tree and its roots speaks to how we both consciously and unconsciously make meaning and knowledge of our lives. Our beliefs are the trunk of this tree, above the surface, which lead to our actions, which lead to our outcomes, which lead

back to our beliefs. Our reflection, which is under the surface, leads to discovery, and those are our roots, which lead to our beliefs.

## The Foundation of Transformation

There is a saying, “We lead from who we are.” But in the context of the Soil of Leadership we might say “We lead from who we are and where we are rooted.” Or, even better, “Our fruits are only as strong as our roots.” Reflective Practice helps us discover a greater connection to both roots and fruits—the very essence of who we are and where we are rooted.

## CHAPTER 5: FALLOW

Over the past twenty years, I have heard the same thing from leaders countless times. We have learned to work and produce, but we struggle to rest and restore. Why is this the case?

### Rest is a Four-Letter Word

The world over, we are all encouraged to work hard, lean in, live large, and treat every moment as if it were our last. Those who do are celebrated and held up as role models who are “making it count.” If we are to believe the mythology, to pursue anything less suggests you are falling short of your potential. I encourage you to question and even reject this frame. People (never mind leaders) cannot be at their best without rest.

### Depleted Nutrients

Over time, repeated extraction depletes whatever nutrients may have been present in the earth to the point of scarcity, and dependencies rise as the cycle of production accelerates and compresses to meet the demands of precarious consumption: plant, manage, harvest, and repeat. Growing soil, on the other hand, situates production in a larger context, understanding that there

should be no extraction without restoration. We push and challenge the ground to provide, but never lose sight of the truth that healthy plants thrive in healthy soil.

## The Importance of Fallow

In agriculture, fallow is when a field is left unsown for an extended period of time for the purpose of restoring fertility or to allow it to rest from the churn of production. We tend to assume that any farmer would prefer that their field(s) be in a state of production, but farmers focused on the long term learn to value the fallow. We cannot build sustainability into our systems without structured and deliberate restoration and reflection. These practices are multifaceted and take time, but it is not simply time “away” from work—it is the time in true rest that makes action possible.

### Intent, Time, and Space

What does fallow look and feel like for those who are not sustainable farmers? For me, my periods of fallow are characterized by intent (the act of stepping back and away from a production mindset), time (significant, uninterrupted stretches of time—days not hours—of being rather than doing), and space (whether it takes the form of emotional and/or physical space).

## CHAPTER 6: SPACIOUSNESS

To ensure that myriad relationships thrive, a farmer must mind the spaces in between: newly planted seeds and seedlings, fresh furrows and rows, layers of organic waste on the compost pile, even between microorganisms in the soil. Above ground, not enough space chokes off full potential; too much compromises production goals. Below the surface, the success of root systems and the very survival of microorganisms relies upon thoughtful spacing. What if we made it part of the leader’s task to make and comprehend space, taking



into consideration not only how much space we occupy (seeking to “right size” to take up more or less of it), but also how we relate to it and to the ways we let it (and ourselves) be?

## Soil Compaction

With good soil tilth—soil that is properly cultivated, so it is spongy, allowing for air and water movement—plants thrive, and the world beneath the surface teems with life and billions of biological interactions. But without it, in a state of soil compaction, life expansion is stunted, and diversity has no foundation in which to flourish.

## Choose Space

In the early days of leading my own organization, I was not attuned to when my production-heavy ideas and interventions were short-sighted, naive, and destined to burn myself (and others) out. I did not have the awareness (and in all honesty, the humility) to choose spaciousness. It was not until I connected the lessons of soil compaction to the challenges of leadership that I was able to grow and deepen my approach to work (and life). Only when we allow spaciousness can new ideas or opportunities, new roots (and shoots), really begin to grow.

## Scaling Up vs. Rooting Down

If we are to continue to produce fruit and impact lives, what is most important is the strength and depth of their root systems. Put differently, what matters most is not scaling up and out, but rooting down and deep. When we pay attention to spaciousness and the spaces in between, we create the conditions for transformational and long-term growth.

## CHAPTER 7: ROOTS

Roots, and the soil in which they are planted, matter. In the canon of metaphors, roots are used to evoke a sense of purpose, connectedness, and inner resolve. The root—or roots in general—are invoked when we want to express that we are going deep.

### Grass Roots

Take, for example, the metaphor of the grass roots. Often used in politics to evoke images of community and “real” people working to create change. In the context of leadership, the idea of grass roots is not particularly helpful. Grass roots find strength in their underground network and are not particularly equipped to handle change.

### The Taproot

A taproot drives deep into the soil. The strength of the taproot is that some plants, if harvested, can grow back. When the taproot is strong, so is the tree. The taproot is the conduit that provides connection to what matters most deeply, provides stability, and sustains you when conditions are challenging and resources are scarce.

### Gobo

When it comes to food, flowering plants deliver us goodness through their fruits, but root crops give up their lives and offer the very foundation of their being to provide substance to others. Burdock (called gobo in Japanese) is my favorite of all vegetables. Its roots are thin, whip-like tendrils that work their way through clay and compacted soil to make room for air and water to give life to the soil and other plants.

### Becoming Root-Bound

A plant becomes root-bound when its root systems run out of space. This occurs when a plant is grown in a

container (not in open soil) and its root become a gnarled, dense mass that allows too little space to grow and so the plant's growth is stunted.

### Deep Watering

To water a plant does not mean to literally water the plant. Watering the soil means tending to the conditions under which plant roots can and will absorb moisture. It means thinking about how the patterns and strategies of watering can shape plant health and resilience. The practice of deep watering results in greater resilience by focusing on the depth of roots.

## CHAPTER 8: WELL-BEING

Regenerative farming is about the promotion of health and well-being. In this chapter we will apply a soil-building approach to something that may sound familiar but begs for a new approach that prioritizes roots over fruits and the transformational over the temporary: well-being.

### Wilting

"You are like a plant without water," my colleague said. "You are wilting. How are you nourishing yourself?" I lied in a way that we all do and without a hint of shame. I lied in a way that you probably have done several times already today. I said I was "fine."

### Well-Being is a Must

If you're wilting on the surface, your soil dried out long ago. It is, therefore, long past time to regenerate your taproot by building a practice of deep watering—a practice of well-being. Ongoing well-being requires attention to both your relationship to others and to the world around you.

### Well-Being vs. Self-Care

Self-care is for the plants—your presentation, your maintenance, your ability to get from one day to the next. Well-being is about the soil—your deeper sense of purpose, your ongoing commitment to yourself and the reasons why you do the work, your investment in the long term and the depth of the roots you want to grow.

### Work-Life Balance

The idea of work-life balance is based on the assumption that work is not inextricably a part of life. I fundamentally reject this framing. Work-life balance is an idea that simply cannot exist for you if you are driven to be a leader, because your work is part of your life. So to try to cleave your work from your life is a false premise.

### Your Deep Watering and Well-Being Practice

When it comes to well-being, I have learned that commitment has to come from within. Perennial Well-being Practice is a self-selected, ongoing activity that positively contributes to and restores your overall sense of well-being—emotional, physically, and perhaps even spirituality. It is an essential element in building a more generative and restorative leadership that is grounded and whole.

## CHAPTER 9: AWARENESS

The soil-building approach to leadership is fundamentally about expanding your awareness. While it is true that leadership is inherently external facing, it is performed and expressed with an emphasis on "how to be" and "what to do." Effective leadership is not possible without attention to the internal core, the taproot of leadership: who you are.



## The Impact of Intent

People can easily drift and find their internal life misaligned with their external actions: performing leadership as it is imagined to best be, rather than practicing a leadership that is more aligned with the authentic self. This can push leaders out of integrity and yield results that are not what they hoped.

## All About the Soil

So when the opportunity to start my own farm presented itself, just months after coming back, I was clear that I was going to start with the soil, lead with the soil, and end with the soil—and no one was going to change that. Everything would be about the soil.

## Recreating the Farm

I had the farm, but I had yet to cultivate the conditions. I had the clear intent, but it was nowhere near where it needed to be to achieve significant impact—or at least the kind of impact that would enable me to farm season after season.

## Self-Awareness

Are you currently in a state of expansion or contraction? Expansion is when you are creative, divergent, adaptive, and connected to learning new things. Contraction is when you are conservative, convergent, firm, and connected to your existing beliefs. Is where you are where you want to be?

## A Viable Bean Farm

It was a clarifying experience to give over five of my six acres to beans and produce a commodity for the chain after the gut punch of letting go of the thinking, “I can grow a six-acre garden,” and recognizing, “What I need to do is produce a viable business. And if I don’t do that, I will no longer be in business.”

## CHAPTER 10: WORKING TOGETHER

When it came time to start my own farm, my true purpose came into sharp relief: community development and social impact through agriculture practice—not farming with a side of education.

### Coastal Sage Farms

As three friends and I worked to realize my vision for Coastal Sage Farms, I discovered that collaborations, especially those that aim for the stars, cannot thrive on goodwill alone. When our collaboration failed, I later understood that we had not cultivated the conditions for a partnership so weighty with intention to be able to grow and flourish.

### Academic Life and Language

Going back to school helped me to see that, for me, connecting people to living soil had little to do with agriculture and everything to do with learning—namely, how learning could transform people’s lives for the better. I learned in the early, rocky phase of my time working in startups, the true preface to collaboration needs to be: “Is now the time, is here the place, and are we the people?”

### Working Together to Achieve Something

Collaboration at its most basic begins with exchanging resources, trading skills, or pooling efforts in the interest of a common purpose. There is a shared purpose and shared outcomes. The integration of hearts—the unifying of the separate pieces to create a greater sense of wholeness—this is the realm of love. To be and remain in this space—especially in organization and group life—is rare and often fleeting.

## **Collaboration Rhetoric**

Inspirational drives to action and collaborative rhetoric—using the language of “family” and “us versus them”—can obscure and be used to exploit partnerships, especially in contexts where people are there for the love of the work, such as nonprofits and academia.

### **The Rhetoric-Reality Gap**

Accurately naming and nurturing the desired kinds of collaborations is one way for an organization, team, or partnership to cultivate the conditions. There is nothing inherently problematic about having people on staff who are there “just” to get a paycheck, so long as they are doing their work on a high level. A staff member’s high commitment to the organization does not outweigh their being severely underqualified.

## **Power and Influence**

If you have worked in the social sector or raised money in support of a business venture, you are familiar with the challenges of “donor speak” and of navigating relationships with those who hold the resources. There’s nothing wrong with a take-the-money collaboration as long as you reflect on whether you are equipped to take on this money, and what the funder really expects.

## **Unsustainable Money**

Hope is important, but it doesn’t pay the bills. A clear understanding of the nature of your partnership and the motivations for your collaboration (on both sides) are essential to the pursuit of sustained fundraising success, and a respectful ending to a partnership, if that time comes. A functional, healthy collaboration becomes an ecosystem unto itself. Able to withstand disasters and grow back stronger than ever. Able to adapt and change with minimal disruption.

## **CHAPTER 11: COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY**

Once while working to transform the soil on an urban farm, I heard banging around in the tractor’s rototiller and stopped to find a grenade with the pin missing. Unlike a sustainable farm where one might eventually unearth all the surprises that sit beneath the surface, in leadership the unexpected turn is inherent to the experience. In leadership there are always going to be grenades outside of our view—which underscores the importance of tilling and turning over the earth.

### **Reflecting with Others**

Individual reflection is one way that we surface hidden grenades, but collaborative inquiry is even more effective in exposing our misguided assumptions and gaps in awareness.

### **Soil-Building Conversations**

We all struggle to have conversations that help participants feel seen and heard and that result in generative outcomes. In my organization we have prioritized “soil building conversations” that are journeys of discovery through uncertainty to find clarity and resourcefulness.

### **Reflection and Discovery Circle**

Another collaborative inquiry approach that has proved to be useful for leaders is the Reflection and Discovery Circle, which is a step-by-step process with two or three peer consultants that do not offer advice but ask powerful questions to help the presenter come to their own greater clarity.

### **Collective Reflective Practice**

Another approach, Collective Reflective Practice, when a group of people who experience a similar event, all complete the Reflective Practice outline, and then come

together and share their learnings. This may sound basic, but the conversations bring people closer together and cultivate the conditions for transformation—soil building—and clearly illustrates how we all see things from different perspectives—even when it might seem like we all saw the same thing. Collective inquiry is important not because we might find a grenade in our soil, but so that we can.

## CONCLUSION

The kind of leaders we need today recognize the complexity of the worlds they inhabit and understand that they are not the center of the action but a conduit of energy, unifying the separate elements in their ecosystem to foster growth and transformation. They seek the generative, expansive power that comes as a result of pursuit, and are prepared to reflect, discern, and discover how to better their intent and impact.

The practice of being adaptive, nimble, and responsible to change is the very stuff of resilience—the kind of resilience that comes from regenerative agriculture, a resilience that is a positive, generative outcome of living soil and deep roots rather than the behavior of last resort in response to great suffering and pain.

### Conditions Matter

If I am being honest, I failed to understand the challenge of transference, and that was one major reason why I left the farming profession. Ultimately, it was not for lack

of good intentions nor a clear purpose. I had failed to understand the conditions—the soil—were not there to support the kind of impact I believed I could have.

And that's okay.

This realization reminds us that conditions matter, and they are sometimes such that your intentions and strong intent to improve things won't result in you achieving your vision.

And I'm here to say: do it anyway.

Leadership is complicated, hard, messy work that can become transformational for both you and the people you work with when you are more deeply rooted in purpose, fed by well-being, and connected to what matters.

### Germination

Germination is hope. The first shoot is about potential, but the first root is about purpose. As leaders, we need the presence of both.

So let us celebrate the activated potential in germination, but let us remember that healthy and strong root growth is what drives the realization of potential.

It is the hidden and inner world, outside of the view of many, that shapes our presentation in leadership.

The deeper the roots, the stronger the shoots.