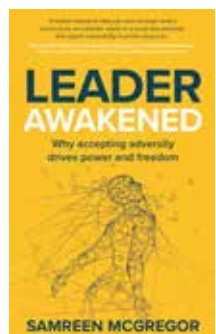


Title: *Leader Awakened*
Author: Samreen McGregor
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Samreen McGregor is an executive coach who has worked globally with senior leaders and teams across industry sectors. With a unique ability to create the conditions leaders need to stretch beyond their existing capabilities, her interventions lie in a unique cross-section between business performance, behavioural change and embodied consciousness.
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Books



In *Leader Awakened*, author and executive coach **Samreen McGregor** challenges leaders to understand the nature of trauma, accept adversity and embrace their vulnerability. She talks to **Nicola Banning** about why this makes for better leaders

NB: There are countless books written about leadership – why was it important for you to write *Leader Awakened* and what did you see was missing from what already exists?

SM: I appreciate and am inspired by continued research and writing into the topic of leadership. While modern leadership theory is evolving towards more complex, fluid, unpredictable interrelationships that exist across wider organisational systems, what I feel is missing is the embodied and emotional expression of this for individuals, teams and organisations.

Leader Awakened sets out to bring real, palpable and relatable narratives that bridge theoretical concepts and evidenced trends with actual leadership practice. The desired outcome is a readership of aspiring, established and developing leaders seeing themselves working through real dilemmas – taking space and time to access deep emotional, embodied, philosophical and spiritual manifestations of what can at many times feel lonely and challenging as they read, refract and use the frames to get to know themselves better.

NB: You write incredibly honestly about your family's trauma when your son was suddenly diagnosed with a brain tumour and operated on, and how your family coped in the aftermath. Why was it important to share such a personal story in a book about leadership?

SM: I am an executive coach whose practice is grounded in relational philosophy. This coaching approach supports growth through non-judgmental means, by holding a coachee as an agent in their life, where the coaching relationship can surface necessary resources to address challenges.

I chose to use a storytelling approach, offering myself as an instrument to learn, to inspire refractions and model what it takes to connect with one's self. I experience a lot of what is written about leadership, especially topics relating to vulnerability and authenticity

to be theoretical and conceptual. There is less disclosure and open expression about the inherent barriers, given the nuanced quality of development this involves. I have over 20 years of coaching experience where I hold an intimate space for clients to refract and deepen their embodied awareness, amplify their systemic view, clarify choices and generate significant shifts. It was my turn to divulge, in an open way, the discipline of doing this work myself (as a coachee), and to demonstrate the courage it takes to stay with what comes from it; which includes less desirable emotions like pain, fear, embarrassment and shame; just as it evokes relief, release and joy that comes from progressing intentions and overcoming hurdles.

NB: What did you learn from your experience of your son being so ill that you have taken into your coaching work with leaders?

SM: I recognise moments throughout my career where I felt overwhelmed, and at times when the rhythm of life accelerated, I was task-focused and I had limited perspective to notice what was within my sphere to influence and change. This sensation can still reappear. Until the first moment my son's neurosurgeon and oncologist shared the blatant possibility of us losing him or his fundamental life functions from surgical interventions and treatment, I realised I had a very different experience of these emotions. A wisdom derived from the feeling of having nothing left to lose, has enriched me with perspective, elasticity and tolerance, all of which serve as frames that I extend to my clients.

My life experience has taught me that there is a whole world of circumstances individuals carry day to day, that is in the most part unseen or acknowledged

by those work colleagues and stakeholders they spend a huge proportion of their time with.

Leader Awakened is a signal for leaders to notice this largely unexplored territory they share at a basic human level with each and every person they work with. It is an invitation to develop an interest, the skills and the compassion to connect and support others in pursuit of a kinder workplace.

NB: Can you explain what impact your identity as a global citizen has had on the lens through which you see the world and how it feeds into your work as a coach?

SM: 'Global citizenship' is a bittersweet representation of my identity. I've cherished living and working from what feels like being on the sidelines, where I am a cultural exception, where my perspective is void from being rooted or having consistent traditions and norms. This has given me a unique propensity for skipping a tendency to judge, and instead being open hearted and curious. Seeing the world, engaging in relationships and carrying out my work with a sense of detachment has gifted me with objectivity and an appreciative stance.

As an executive coach, this quality is helpful, as it means I can distinguish, call out and avoid colluding with untested assumptions and biases. Some of the core skills of coaching, such as listening actively, not jumping to advice and playing back objectively, tend to come naturally to me. I have also suffered many moments of insufficient psychological safety given my differences, and my care for establishing these conditions is built into the climatic conditions I create with clients.

NB: Therapists are familiar with the power of reflective spaces but you have coined a new term – 'refracting'. Can you explain what it is?

SM: In therapy, coaching and personal development, the role of reflection is vital in reviewing what experience or theoretical insight might mean or look like in practice, and to gather learnings or adjust course. Similarly, reflection plays a part in looking ahead to set intentions, to plan or visualise.

Metaphorically, the act of 'reflecting' relates to a physics principle about

what happens to light when it strikes a surface. The ray of light simply bounces back from a smooth surface. There isn't necessarily a change, just a visual and physical effect.

To take this physics analogy a bit further, in contrast, 'refraction' occurs when light travels across different medium (such as air, water or glass), causing a distinct change in speed and direction. I encourage leaders to consider this phenomenon when considering their thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviours.

The invitation to 'refract' is to encourage leaders to purposefully slow down, to move from a space of high to low activity, and in practice this means do less, to allow themselves to mindfully engage in just 'being' rather than always 'doing'. To make time for contemplation or for sensing and feeling. This requires a deeper type of work, with less distraction and more focus. This change in speed is what causes a shift in conditions and direction in what is felt, thought through and ultimately imparts needed or desired changes. The slower the speed at which light travels through water, the further away it moves from the norm, which in practice may mean the greater the potential for change.

NB: I imagine you meet leaders who say they don't have time to reflect or refract because of the business needs and who are cynical about spending time 'not doing'. What do you say them?

SM: You are spot on. The tendency is to aim to 'do it all' – to balance competing priorities and hedge bets by keeping all bases covered. So, we have an early conversation that encourages them to better understand what is the cost of this set of expectations and resulting rhythm. I often ask them to do a simple exercise, to write down their answers to two questions:

'What am I doing that I believe I shouldn't be doing?' and, 'What should I be doing that I am not doing?' We explore how achieving results on costly initiatives fall short of objectives, and do not deliver the expected return on investment or fulfil expectations. Importantly, we dive deeper into what is compromised at a personal and interpersonal level. Undesirable effects like stress, anxiety, uncollaborative

dynamics and toxicity come up as key characteristics in their day-to-day life. By that point, they are keen to understand how the coaching space will help them to uncover how they can make changes to minimise or reverse these effects.

NB: It's not uncommon to hear organisations say that they want their people to be able to 'bring their whole selves to work' but our whole selves are messy, complex and contradictory. What needs to shift in an organisation for their people to be able to do this in reality?

SM: This is a really important question, and is multifaceted and controversial for all the reasons you state. Yes, our 'selves' are messy, complex and contradictory. And the conditions within an organisation are multi-layered, complex and conflicted too, which can create a hostile environment for anyone to be their true self. I witness an enormous amount of rhetoric inviting and sometimes demanding people to bring 'their whole self' to work. I also notice there is a sort of superficiality about what this request actually means, the intention not quite being fully understood, and based on an aspirational view of authenticity.

Having written a book which is very personally revealing, and where I purposefully share the bright and the ugly; I can now state, it takes courage, risk and conviction about why I am choosing to reveal such intimate content. My mission is to help people to distinguish the act of disclosure from the skill of making conscious connection with themselves and others by being true to their values, needs and choices.

I see too many people compromise their needs repetitively, relinquishing their self-efficacy and agency, and I see this in corporate life a lot. By developing a richer sense of self-awareness that extends beyond the cognitive and psychological lenses we typically lean on, to include physiological and spiritual insights, we can grasp a far deeper and more holistic perspective of our 'self'. By slowing down, doing less, stepping back and viewing the bigger picture through a systemic lens, we gather more holistic information that coupled with an upgraded understanding of our 'selves' can enable us to navigate with coherence.

NB: Do you have any hopes for the readers who read your book?

SM: I hope *Leader Awakened* continues to inspire a new generation of leaders to do critical work necessary to navigate the unfolding backdrop surrounding organisational life. This book will help to cultivate compassionate leaders who are committed to improve the human condition and humanise the future of work. ●