

From fear to trust!

# Secure Base Leadership

*Create a culture for innovation and exponential growth!*



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*Dr. Jeroen Seegers (PhD)*

Jeroen Seegers is Managing Partner at Quaestus Executive Leadership. In 2008 he did his doctorate (PhD) on the subject 'Leaders Learn', an international study on the conditions in which top managers can develop their leadership. He investigated the leadership and learning behaviour of a group of forty CEOs over a period of four years. Seegers has developed leadership programmes for various national and international organisations (including UPC, Heineken and OCE) and has been associated with IMD Business School in Lausanne as an Executive Coach since 2009. He advised the management boards of Rabobank, Friesland Campina and DSM, amongst others. He is a member of the Dutch Association of Psychologists (NIP) and an Organisational Advisor (Certified Management Consultant) with more than 35 years of experience in the business world.



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# Secure Base Leadership: from fear to trust!

*By Dr Jeroen Seegers*

I am often asked if I have some examples of Secure Base Leadership. Yes, I do have. I would like to point to the clip from the film *Invictus*, based on the life of Nelson Mandela. The actor, Morgan Freeman, plays Mandela and shows the different roles of a Secure Base leader in a fascinating way: that of a visionary, that of a manager and that of a coach. It happens at the moment when Mandela, as the first black president, makes his appearance at the presidential palace. Anxious white employees are busy emptying their desks and packing up their belongings. Mandela is on the way to his first cabinet meeting with the new, black government. Suddenly, he orders his assistant to tell his team of ministers to wait as he wants to address the staff first. He tells them that anyone who really does not want to work for the new government had better leave. "But," he adds in the same breath, "if you are packing up because you fear that your language [South Africa has no less than eleven official languages, including Afrikaans and English (JS)] or the colour of your skin or who you worked for before disqualifies you from working here, I am here to tell you, have no such fear. *Wat is verby is verby*. The past

is the past. We look to the future now. We need your help. We want your help. If you would like to stay, you would be doing your country a great service. All I ask is that you do your work to the best of your abilities and with good heart. I promise to do the same. If we can manage that, our country will be a shining light in the world."

## **Pianist Maria João Pires in a panic**

Another example can be found on YouTube. It is a recording of a lunch concert at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. We see the famous conductor Riccardo Chailly and the just as famous pianist Maria João Pires. She is in utter panic when she realises that the piece that has begun is not the one she expected. She is close to despair, so badly that against all the rules, she speaks with Chailly while the orchestra is playing. Almost bursting into tears, she says she rehearsed a different concerto and that she left the sheet music for the extremely difficult piece which she has to play at home. Chailly does not flinch and leaves the orchestra playing



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MARIA JOÃO PIRES PLAYS HER PART  
WITHOUT THE SHEET MUSIC AND  
WITHOUT MAKING ONE MISTAKE.

towards the piano part. In a very calm tone, he reassures her: “You played this piece last season. I’m sure you can do it.” Then, with an encouraging laugh on his face, he says: “You know it so well!” At that moment, the piano has to start and Maria João Pires then plays her part, without the sheet music and without making one mistake.

### **Michelin stars**

The last example is from the film *Burnt* (2015), a comedy about a chef in Paris who is on his way to the top with a starred restaurant. The opportunity comes when an inspector from Michelin walks in. The chef gets an adrenaline rush and pushes his team to the extreme. However, this has a counterproductive effect. A team member who has a bone to pick with the chef throws a whole bottle of pepper into the inspector’s dish and as a result, the glory is gone. The chef loses everything through alcohol and drugs. He then picks himself up and starts another venture with a new restaurant in London. On a certain day, Michelin pulls up a chair again. The chastened chef stays cool this time and tells his team to ‘cook today like they cook every day’. You can guess how the film ends: this time they do gain the glory.

Each of these three examples – you can watch the clips on the Quaestus website, [www.quaestus.eu](http://www.quaestus.eu) – illustrates what Secure Base leaders do in their own way, or indeed should not do. In the pages below, I will go into more detail about the various types of leadership and the specific characteristics of Secure Base Leadership.



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# The power of Secure Base Leadership

**Secure Base leaders provide connections and trust, combine clarity of course with the creation of strong bonds with their employees. By becoming a Secure Base leader, you can unleash a huge amount of potential and talent among your employees. They will dare to take initiative and make mistakes. This will lead to increased productivity, better morale and improved results. Inspiration, generating confidence and providing space to learn are all closely related to each other. How does this work exactly?**

## **Focus on leadership**

Leadership is a popular theme. The number of publications about leadership has exploded in the past fifteen years. There are authors from the more popular fold

such as Covey, Collins, Hersey and Blanchard, Kets de Vries, as well as authors from a more academic angle. Among others, Bass, McCauly, Van Velsen, Dotlich and Avolio have regularly published about leadership and leadership development in recent years. A study by Dinh et al (Dinh 2014) looked at the number of publications about leadership in the top 10 leadership journals in the 2000-2012 period. There were 752. They found 66 different leadership theories. To name a few: the Great Man theory, which is used to describe Napoleon, for example. There is also transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Others include charismatic and transformational, managerial and strategic, cross cultural and result-based leadership. These involve a multitude of leadership styles that are described by a key term: servant leadership, for example. But we also come across typologies such as spiritual, authentic, adaptive, followership, ethical, sustainable, vertical, shared, public, situational, implicit and dialogical. Finally, there is



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destructive leadership: this is the leadership in which leaders misbehave with all the ensuing consequences.

### Charisma

Each theory has its advantages and limitations. In many publications, transformational leadership is preferred as the most ideal form of leadership, in favour of transactional leadership. Transformational leaders are charismatic, inspiring, intellectually stimulating and considerate. They have a strong focus on relationships and are particularly strong on care, with feedback that focuses on development. By contrast, transactional leadership is more competitive, goal and task oriented and controlling. Here, feedback focuses on performance improvement. There are also studies in which both forms of leadership are seen as two sides of the same coin.

### Care and dare

Another popular theory is the servant leadership theory. This theory has only recently come to researchers' attention although it was conceived as early as 1970 by Robert Greenleaf, a former manager at AT&T (Spears 1996). To make this easier, we can see this as a special form of transformational leadership. The core of the theory is that the leader is primarily here to serve, not only their own employees, but also the customers. The primary focus is on the people and not so much on the organisation or the results.

A study by Kaiser (2008) shows that people should not only look at leaders from the perspective of those who are in charge, but also from the perspective of the followers. Leadership and followership are inextricably linked. Why would you follow your leader? During the many lectures I give about leadership, I often ask about the conditions under which people will want to follow their leader. There are many different answers to this, but at the core, only two real answers remain.

Employees follow their boss when their boss cares about them and challenges them (care and dare) so that they can grow. It keeps coming back to these two elements. Regardless of whether we are asking mine workers in the gold mines of South Africa (Schuitema 1998, 2000) or a group of bank directors of ABN AMRO, the answers are the same.

### Leadership at its core

Although there are many definitions of leadership, in essence, it is always about influencing followers to achieve a (group) goal and to coordinate this process. This goes way back to prehistoric times (2.5 million years ago) when hominids lived in small groups, comprising of 50 to 150 individuals, on the African savannahs with a hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Vught 2008). From an evolutionary survival strategy, everyone will try to be the leader, but not everyone can succeed. Most people become followers. Conflicts and management of conflicts, were and are important themes. Along with the rise of civilisation, the ambition for power also developed. Warlords, kingdoms and a cultural elite emerged. Although there are still countries where the warlord model – complete with oppression and slavery – is the primary form of leadership, a new form of leadership, particularly in the west, has arisen due to the industrial revolution. The suppressive leadership style made way for a leadership style which emphasized the interdependence of leaders and followers. This went hand in hand with social class struggle, emancipation and bureaucracy.

### Charioteer

What is leadership about? You can compare this with driving a team of horses. The first thing you need to know is of course where you want to go: set the course. But even then, how do you get the animals to the point which they follow a certain path and turn to the right or to the left at the correct moment? Then it comes down to getting about 1,500 kilos to go to the left or the right with simple reins.



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Is it just a matter of pulling the right or left rein? If you ask an experienced horse driver, you will get this answer: "Don't pull as that will hurt and then the horse will follow only because it is in pain. But if you keep just a little tension on the one rein and slacken the other rein a little, the horse will go in the desired direction of its own accord."

This is the essence of leading: giving space while maintaining contact. Many leaders get this wrong: they either hold on too tightly (control) or they give too much slack (neglect). It comes down to the right balance between giving space and maintaining contact, just like between transactional and transformational leadership, between nurturing and challenging, between care and dare. The difference between a leader and a manager is that a manager has employees and a leader has followers. We found that followers only follow when they feel that their leader cares about them and provides ways for them to grow. There is also another major difference between a manager and a leader: a manager uses people as a means of getting work done, while a leader uses work as a means to let people grow.

### Leadership is personal

Leaders are able to inspire, leaders get things done and leaders have followers. Leaders have an exemplary role in the organisation, but they are able to fulfil this role only when their actions fit their personality. This makes leadership personal. This is about leaders who are credible role models because they are consistent and authentic and they practice what they preach. They can only keep this up if they stay true to themselves and lead from their own intrinsic motivation. The question 'what drives me as a leader?' is crucial. What are my basic needs which give me energy (energy gainers)? What costs me energy (energy drainers)? This not only means that they have to know themselves well, but they also have to be



OUT OF AN EVOLUTIONARY  
SURVIVAL STRATEGY, EVERYONE  
WOULD TRY TO BE THE LEADER.



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THIS IS ABOUT THE VIEW OF  
THE WORLD, OR THE MIND'S EYE:  
DO YOU HAVE A POSITIVE OR  
A NEGATIVE VIEW OF THE WORLD?

able to 'manage their motivation'. We call this motivational capability: being able to manage your own needs (what do I need to feel strong) and your own energy drainers.

Some leaders let themselves be guided in their actions by reason (the head). These are the thinkers. Others are primarily led by their emotions (the heart). These are the feelers. Yet another group is led by its focus on action (the hands): these are the doers.

### The thinkers

The thinkers primarily act intellectually through problem analysis and reasoning, sometimes bringing issues up for critical discussion. Their answer to the question 'Why' is substantive and reasoned. This is about the worldview or the mind's eye: do I have a positive view of the world around me, of others, of myself, or do I have a negative outlook? According to neuropsychology, a negative view is more likely than a positive view. After all, we have learned to survive by being apprehensive of danger, pain, threats, etc. The mind's eye is fed by experiences from the past. But the question is whether we want to let ourselves be held hostage. In his book 'Hostage at the Table', the American psychologist and IMD profession George Kohlrieser describes how leaders let themselves be trapped by negative experiences from the past. By looking at the world with negative assumptions, the future becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. A way to gain control of this is to study how experiences from the past influence the present, how these experiences conflict with your own needs and how the negative experiences go through a sort of mourning process. A negative view of the world is associated with the inadequate processing of loss. The problem is that when leaders make negative assumptions, others often experience them as disrespectful. However, when leaders make positive assumptions, this often has a positive effect on other's performance. The so-called Pygmalion effect is a good example: this is the effect



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when someone starts to behave according to the expectations that the authority figure has of him or her.

### The feelers

While some leaders are guided by reason, others are (consciously or unconsciously) led by feelings (the heart). This is more about acting on the emotions they are feeling. Their response to the question 'Why' is: "Because that is how I feel!" Now you can express your emotions in two ways: you can make a connection with others through positive emotions by showing enthusiasm and inspiration. Or you can break the relationship through negative emotions by creating distance and being offensive. In the latter case, the other person will quickly feel insecure.

### The doers

The real doers primarily focus on action (the body). These are people who love to get down to work and are practical in their approach. Their answer to the 'Why' question is usually: "Because someone has to do it." But saying and doing are two different things. There tends to be a high risk of inconsistency. This is about walking the talk, doing what you say and saying what you do. Through consistent behaviour, trust is created.

### Definition of Secure Base Leadership

The three elements described above, such as a positive mind's eye (1), a bonding manner of showing emotions (2) and consistency in behaviour (3), provide a base of security, respect and trust. In this way, the leader creates a Secure Base on which employees dare to show their talents, dare to experiment and explore and dare to take risks and challenges (dare).

Kohlrieser and others (Kohlrieser 2012) define a Secure Base as something or

someone that provides a sense of safety, protection and caring and can therefore be a source of inspiration for daring and seeking challenge. They call this Secure Base leadership: influencing others by being a secure base for them. A Secure Base leader ensures that people are given roles that make the best possible use of their talents. In this, it is important that people dare to identify what they are good at and not good at. By making this visible, the leader reinforces the bond between the people in the team. After all, you need a Secure Base to dare to take a vulnerable position. The same applies to innovation. Innovation involves risk-taking which also requires a Secure Base. Secure Base leadership revolves around the dialogue: the discussion between employee and leader.

### Leadership roles

Leadership can be defined as using a collective vision to get relevant things done, for and by people. Leadership is about creating value together with other people. Three leadership roles can be distinguished here. The leader constantly switches between these three roles while trying to find the correct balance. These roles are:

1. the role of strategist/entrepreneur/visionary
2. the role of executive/manager/structure-giver
3. the role of connector/coach/people manager

There is no right or wrong way to distribute these roles. There is nothing like a fixed or ideal formula for this. But staying in a specific role for too long is not always as effective due to possible pitfalls.

#### 1. The leader as strategist/entrepreneur/visionary

In this role, the leader can be best described as a strategic entrepreneur: leaders set out a course. This area of focus is relevant to the leader's strategic task in which vision holds an important position. Leadership is about giving direction, motivating and inspiring, which leads to changes being made. Looking ahead,



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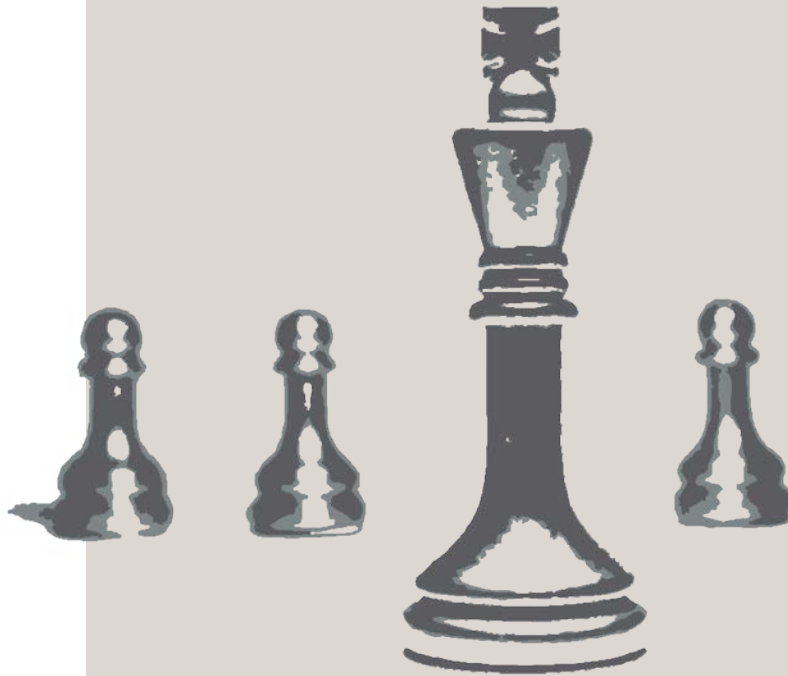
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THE STRATEGIC LEADER HAS  
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identifying and seizing opportunities are important behaviours. Vision is the driving force behind the leader's efforts. The greater the ability of the leader to have a vision, share this with others and express this in his behaviour, the stronger his leadership.

*How does this translate into leadership behaviour?*

A visionary leader takes time to reflect, thinks about the course to follow and the goals which he wants to achieve. He shares his vision with his people, enthusiasts them and calls for some recognition and acceptance for the risks he takes. But there is also a flip side. The leader can freeze under the pressure of the undertaking. He stops taking risks and steps away from his authority. The pitfall is that this leader locks himself up in his ivory tower, uses his position of power to get agreement and to reproach others when they do not or inadequately follow him. The leader no longer concerns himself with his people and conversely he also gets the sense that his people do not care about him. He feels safe by just thinking about the strategy constantly. We call this *'play to avoid'*.

## **2. The leader as an executive/manager/structure-giver**

The leader as a manager primarily focuses on building an effective organisation. This area of focus is relevant to the leader's task of providing structure and determining the process. It is also about getting meaningful things to be done. As a manager, this is about establishing an effective organisation that is aligned to the course they are taking or want to take. It is about building an effective infrastructure. But it is also about challenging people (dare), tapping into their strength, achieving results and striving for high performance. This role also corresponds with what is called transactional leadership.



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*How does this translate into leadership behaviour?*

The executive leader has a strong focus on his task and on getting the work done. He is strongly motivated, self-aware, autonomous and able to deliver results. He challenges his people to be engaged, to take on challenges and to show the best of themselves. The potential pitfall here is when someone who tries to do everything himself starts micromanaging. He adopts a 'do as I do' style. He displays manipulative and coercive behaviour and withdraws when he is under pressure. Someone like this can end up as an independent loner who puts others under pressure to follow his example. After all, it is the result that counts. Work is business and especially not personal. His people need to earn his trust and have to prove themselves. Most people are not loyal by nature, but work primarily just for the money. The executive leader does not have much trust in others and often believes that he can do the work faster and better by himself. We call this *'play to dominate'*.

**3. The leader as a connector/coach/people manager**

The leader as a connector is the third and last area of attention and focuses on the leader's role to mobilise others. This area of attention concerns the people management aspect of leadership. The leader's task is to motivate. Empowerment and creating solidarity are important factors of this (care). Leaders make personal efforts to improve employees' usability. They get their employees involved, speak to them about their behaviour and stimulate them. This is about establishing a connection with the followers. By connection, we refer to bonding with others such that both parties experience more physical, psychological and spiritual energy as a result than when they do not have this connection. This connection is only formed when there is a common interest and people are prepared to trust each other. This role comes close to what is also called transformational leadership or servant leadership.



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#### *How does this translate into leadership behaviour?*

In this role, the leader uses a leadership style that is participative, democratic and focused on partners. He shows that he cares about others and spends sufficient time on them. He also has an eye for alternative viewpoints and ideas. The pitfall here is being overly concerned about one's own performance. This can translate into seeking extra confirmation, but also in doubt and indecision. There is the risk that a connective leader stays on the safe path for too long and does not dare to meet confrontation when necessary. Failure to achieve results can lead to uncertainty. Seeking confirmation from others and becoming indecisive if this is not given. The leader constantly says that he has too little information, waits too long and has the sense that he is, slowly but surely, losing friends in the organisation. We call this *'play not to lose'*.

#### **Secure Base Leadership**

Successful leadership is about creating a Secure Base and a good mix of the three leadership roles when *'playing to win'*. A Secure Base leader knows how to inspire, is a role model, is an authentic leader, has integrity, is not complacent and is open to change and learning. But how does a leader do that?

Kohlrieser identifies nine competences of a Secure Base leader:

1. A Secure Base leader ***always remains calm***. Such leaders do not let themselves be led by primitive emotions. This means that a leader stays cool under pressure and can act adequately. They do not let themselves be hijacked by their amygdala (the part of the brain that responds to fear stimuli) (Goleman). They provide their employees with security instead of insecurity and are predictable and approachable for their followers.
1. A Secure Base leader ***accepts the individual***. The person comes first. Such leaders appreciate and respect the other, even when the results are not quite

up to expectations. They accept others just as they are, with their talents but also with their shortcomings. They care about their people and see them as more than just a job description.

1. A Secure Base leader ***always sees the potential in the other***. This is about development of their employees in the longer term. They look at the future and therefore further than the current position.
1. A Secure Base leader ***listens and asks questions***. They do this by asking open questions and engaging in dialogue. This goes further than proposing their own solutions or saying what should be done in difficult situations.
1. A Secure Base leader ***communicates with powerful messages***. It is about concrete and specific messages which are unambiguous and clear. They say things directly and at the right moment. They do not beat about the bush, do not sit on the fence and they provide honest feedback.
1. A Secure Base leader ***focuses on the positive*** and looks at the opportunities and advantages, even when the challenge is tough and a crisis has to be resolved. This offers others the chance to discover their potential and to learn.
1. A Secure Base leader ***encourages risk taking***. They offer others the possibility to use their potential, to take risks and to develop talents.
1. A Secure Base leader ***motivates more with intrinsic motivation*** than with monetary rewards. This is mainly about encouraging personal growth, personal development or exploiting potential through additional responsibilities.
1. A Secure Bases leader ***is accessible***. He or she ensures that people feel that they can always go to their leader, even when this leader is not physically present.

#### *How does this translate into leadership behaviour?*

A Secure Base leader is task and goal oriented. He focuses on the people he works with, supports them and challenges them. He is motivated to achieve results with and by the team. He is responsible for and connected with them. He is capable of



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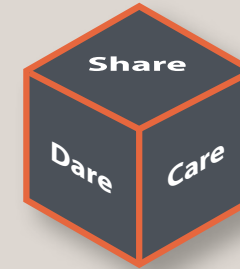
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reflection, even at those moments when things are difficult, he knows what does and does not work. He is aware that his attitude and behaviour are always his own choice. Secure Base leaders reflect on their behaviour. They are aware that they make mistakes and regard this as their primary way of learning. They constantly ask themselves if they are working from a positive mind's eye or from a negative outlook. They consider whether they should use their emotional side to connect (listening and asking questions, showing understanding) or to breakoff (becoming irritated or angry, etc.). An important benchmark is always whether they are consistent in their behaviour (walk the talk) or not. Reflection occurs through dialogue with oneself. This dialogue connects the head to the heart and the body: the question is always why an action was carried out in a certain way. Hence, a Secure Base leader holds a dialogue, not only with employees, but also and primarily with himself.



## Secure Base Leadership

A Secure Base leader does more than just create a secure base. Secure Base leaders do three things: they indicate where they want to go and share this with their followers (share), challenge their people to get the best of themselves (dare) and make sure they have a good connection with their followers (care). A Secure Base leader is transactional and transformational simultaneously.



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Dr. Jeroen Seegers

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#### Quaestus Executive Leadership

Quaestus specialises in Executive Leadership and has a wide range of services in Consulting, Executive Search and Leadership Development. Our mission is to develop a Secure Base in Boards of Directors and management teams with the aim to stimulate structural growth and innovation.

Quaestus has built a recognised position in the Dutch market and is part of IMD International Search Group, a strong worldwide network of top Executive Search companies.



#### Quaestus

“Het Koningshuis”

Koningsweg 66

5211 BN 's-Hertogenbosch

+31 (0)73 615 47 00

[www.quaestus.eu](http://www.quaestus.eu)

[info@quaestus.eu](mailto:info@quaestus.eu)

