

The leadership test: six questions that transform people and organizations



Giuseppe Guaiana, MD, PhD

In his keynote address on leadership and organizational culture, leadership educator Drew Dudley challenged conventional assumptions about leadership and argued that it should be understood less as formal authority or status and more as consistent everyday behaviour rooted in values, courage, and interpersonal impact. Dudley suggested that many highly accomplished professionals fail to recognize themselves as leaders because society traditionally presents leadership through examples of extraordinary public figures rather than ordinary individuals whose actions positively influence others.

According to Dudley, this misunderstanding causes people to overlook meaningful opportunities for leadership within workplaces, organizations, and communities. In an era characterized by declining institutional trust, he argued that leadership is increasingly demonstrated not through titles or rhetoric, but through observable behaviours that reduce fear, increase safety, and improve the experiences of others. Leadership, in his view, is fundamentally relational and expressed through consistent daily actions.

Central to the presentation was the concept of a “personal leadership philosophy,” defined as the principle individuals use when making difficult



decisions between competing options. Dudley cited research showing that leaders who can clearly articulate such a philosophy are perceived by those they lead as substantially more effective and trustworthy. Dudley's own philosophy, "What would the person I want to be do?" became the foundation for a broader discussion about aligning behaviour with personal values.

Dudley then introduced his "leadership test," a behavioural framework originally developed through a university-based social experiment. Students were first asked to identify a core value they wanted reflected consistently in their daily behaviour. Rather than selecting values such as honesty or integrity, the students chose "impact," defining it as "creating moments that cause people to feel better off for having had an interaction with you."

Drawing on behavioural psychology concepts, including the Zeigarnik effect and the question-behaviour effect, Dudley argued that values become more actionable when translated into recurring daily questions. Unanswered questions, he explained, remain cognitively active and, therefore, shape attention and behaviour more effectively than abstract intentions alone.

The leadership test evolved into six daily questions designed to operationalize leadership behaviour:

- 1. Impact:** "What have I done today to recognize someone else's leadership?"
- 2. Empathy:** "What thread did I pull on today?"
- 3. Courage and innovation:** "What did I try today that might not work, but I tried it anyway?"
- 4. Growth and service:** "When did I move someone else closer to a goal today?"
- 5. Fairness and equity:** "How did I ensure I wasn't cruel today?"
- 6. Self-respect and self-care:** "What have I done today to be good to myself?"

Dudley argued that these questions transform leadership from an abstract concept into a repeatable daily practice. Rather than reflecting on values retrospectively, the framework encourages individuals to make intentional values-based decisions throughout the day.



Rather than selecting values such as honesty or integrity, the students chose "impact," defining it as "**creating moments that cause people to feel better off for having had an interaction with you.**"

One of the address's most memorable moments involved Dudley recounting what has become known as the "lollipop moment." He described how a former student approached him years after university to explain that a brief interaction during orientation had profoundly altered the course of her life. Overwhelmed and preparing to leave university on her first day, she encountered Dudley handing out lollipops and encouraging another student to introduce himself to her. The interaction interrupted her decision to leave, helped her remain at university, and contributed to a long-term relationship with the student involved. Dudley emphasized that he had no memory of the interaction, illustrating his central argument that leadership often occurs through ordinary interpersonal moments whose significance may remain invisible to the person creating them.

Throughout the presentation, Dudley distinguished between courage and confidence, arguing that courage involves acting despite fear rather than in the absence of it. He also addressed burnout, imposter syndrome, and self-compassion, emphasizing that leadership requires recognizing personal limits and practising self-respect rather than self-sacrifice alone.

Dudley concluded by encouraging physicians to recognize leadership within their daily interactions and routines. Leadership, he argued, is "not in the big stuff, but in the consistent stuff"; repeated ordinary acts grounded in empathy, courage, fairness, and compassion ultimately shape organizational culture more powerfully than isolated heroic actions.

Author

Giuseppe Guaiana, MD, PhD, FRCPC, CCPE, is an associate professor of psychiatry, Western University; chief of psychiatry, St. Thomas Elgin General Hospital; director, Extended Campus Program, Western University; and clinical director, North of Superior Program.

Correspondence to:

giuseppe.guaiana@gmail.com

CSPL Coaching Network



Cheryl Meriot

ACC (ICF), Nnpn, CEC, CPC, CCHt

Mantra:

Skill remains intact. Access does not.