

# JOURNAL OF LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS



Journal homepage: <https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/leadership>

## Exploring the Three C's: Calm, Concentration, and Cold in 'Nordic' Leadership Practice

Finn Janning<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Responsible Leadership, Geneva Business School, Barcelona 08002, Spain

---

### ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**

Nordic leadership, trust, psychological flexibility, compassion, psychological safety

**Article History:**

Received  
2024-10-02  
Received in revised form  
2025-05-13  
Accepted  
2025-08-09

DOI: 10.22146/jlo.100376

\* Corresponding Author at  
Department of Responsible  
Leadership, Geneva Business  
School, Barcelona 08002, Spain  
E-mail address:  
fjanning@gbsge.com

---

### ABSTRACT

**Introduction/Main Objectives:** This paper explores how calm, concentration, and coldness shape a vulnerable leadership style, fostering trust, psychological safety, and flexibility. Drawing from Nordic leadership traditions, the paper examines how these traits enhance emotional resilience and openness. **Background Problems:** Contemporary leadership often misunderstands vulnerability, despite its potential to enhance trust and psychological safety. The gap lies in understanding how specific qualities like calm, concentration, and coldness contribute to psychological flexibility. **Novelty:** Shows how traits often seen as passive or negative—coldness, calmness, and concentration can foster psychological flexibility and trust. It offers a new perspective on how Nordic leadership balances vulnerability and resilience. **Research Methods:** Using a phenomenological approach, a personal anecdote is interpreted through leadership theories and psychological framework. **Finding/Results:** The paper proposes that calmness, concentration, and coldness enhance leaders' psychological flexibility, fostering trust and improving team dynamics. **Conclusion:** These traits are essential for trust-based, adaptive leadership that balances vulnerability and resilience, benefiting organizational psychological safety and flexibility.

---

## 1. Introduction

What makes a leader truly effective? Is it their ability to inspire trust, maintain composure under pressure, or sustain unwavering focus? These qualities are well-established in leadership discourse. However, what if we introduced a less expected dimension—what if coldness could enhance a leader's effectiveness?

This paper explores the possibility of a distinctively 'Nordic' leadership style, one marked by qualities that may initially seem counterintuitive: calm, concentration, and coldness. These traits contrast with commonly emphasized values in contemporary leadership theory, such as trust, flexibility, equality, empowerment, and learning (Andreasson & Lundqvist, 2018; Dahl & Irgens, 2022). However, as a casual conversation with a Spanish woman revealed, they may offer valuable insight into leading effectively in uncertain and complex environments.

This exploration began with a seemingly simple encounter. A few years ago, a Spanish woman asked me what defined Nordic leadership. When I turned the question back to her, she paused, then said: "They are calm, concentrated, and cold when they lead—quite different from the leadership styles I am used to in Spain." Her observation caught me off guard. It exposed a blind spot in my understanding of the so-called Nordic mentality. It initiated an inquiry into whether these less celebrated traits might play a critical role in leadership today.

Hearing the statement, I began to wonder. The word "wonder" is the English translation of the Latin admiration, meaning admiration or, even better, "the capacity to be amazed"—to be curious and to feel doubt (Malabou,

2013, p. 8). Wondering or being amazed always puts a person between what is inside and outside, between self-knowledge and self-deception. To wonder is both to reveal and to deprive; it is a way of being.

For example, the Spanish woman's words revealed that I had no idea how to define a Nordic mentality. They also revealed my precaution against generalization. On the apparent level, Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish people are not identical, just as Danish people are not a homogeneous mass regarding political identity or moral views. If all Nordic people thought, felt, and behaved identically, they would not only be exceptionally predictable but also, I wondered, who wants to be led by leaders like that?

This reflection aligns the paper more with the notion of complex cultures, where culture is not something you have but something you do. It is constructed or achieved. In contrast to Hofstede's fixed-dimensional approach to culture, Marshall Sahlins argues for a dynamic understanding, highlighting how cultures are continually shaped and reshaped through historical processes and human agency (Sahlins, 2023). This perspective aligns with the preceding understanding of culture and personality, converging with how Margaret Mead explored how different societies construct gender roles and how these constructions vary in complexity across cultures. For example, her research in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) demonstrated how gender roles are culturally, rather than biologically, determined.

By comparing three cultures in New Guinea, Mead showed how these societies' gender roles differed dramatically,

underscoring the complexity of cultural systems. "We found no idea that sex was a powerful driven force either for men or for women... we found among the Mundugumor that both men and women developed as ruthless, aggressive, positively sexed individuals ... we may say that many, if not all, of the personality traits which we called masculine or feminine are as lightly linked to sex as are the clothing. When we consider the behavior of the typical Mundugumor man or woman, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the strength of social conditioning." (Mead, 2001, p. 280).

Thus, although the three C's- calm, concentration, and cold are ascribed to Nordic leaders, they are not necessarily something they have but something that some Nordic leaders do (as leaders do from many other places). In this paper, I aim to delve into the interpretation of the 'three Cs' - calm, concentration, and cold-in the context of leadership. I will elaborate on how these characteristics could form a possible addition to a traditional understanding of Nordic leadership style and suggest ideas about their positive aspects.

However, to clarify, it is not my intention to either justify or debate the possible truth of the Spanish women's claim, for example, whether such geographic mentality style exists, and if so, whether it is the one she proposed; or whether her statement is an example of a reduced political imagination where one group of people such as a nation represent a certain mentality as if such a mentality was geographically formed.

As mentioned, I am skeptical of that kind of thinking. To stress, a particular leadership style affects social practices, such as how a leader expresses a particular way of being in their practice. Nevertheless, I will explore

and interpret her words (or part of them), adding how I understand the "three Cs" concerning a leadership style worth practicing, which does not necessarily have anything Nordic about it. In other words, I will try to clarify what I understand with the three terms, how they might serve as a particular leadership attitude or style, and why such a style could be considered positive—that is, outline clear intentionality guided by ethics mapping, where such a calm, concentrated, and cold leadership style is trying to go.

## 2. Literature Review

Nordic leadership is characterized by a distinctive emphasis on trust, fairness, and transparency, reflecting the social, political, and cultural contexts of the Nordic countries (Erjansola, 2024; Janning et al., 2020). According to Brun (2019), the essence of Nordic leadership can be understood through six key principles: nurture and care, openness and transparency, responsiveness and a willingness to experiment, directness and straightforward communication, inclusion and collaboration, and a strong sense of commitment and purpose. These principles collectively establish a leadership style rooted in mutual respect and ethical responsibility.

Trust is at the heart of this leadership approach, defined in a business context as "the expectation that others' future actions will be favorable to one's interests, such that one is willing to be vulnerable to those actions" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). The concept of vulnerability is crucial here, highlighting that trust is not merely a rational calculation but an act of openness and mutual reliance.

Danish philosopher and theologian K. E. Løgstrup (1997) offers a profound perspective on trust, describing it as 'basic' because of human beings' inherent interdependence. 'To trust,' Løgstrup writes, 'is to lay oneself open' or to place oneself 'in one another's hands' (Løgstrup, 1997, p. 9). This view emphasizes that trust is not just a strategic choice but a fundamental aspect of human existence, essential for personal growth and collective well-being, inspiring us to foster trust in our leadership practices. This literature review explores the role of trust in Nordic leadership, drawing on both theoretical perspectives and empirical research to examine how trust is fostered, maintained, and leveraged in organizations. Nordic leadership is marked by a participative and egalitarian style, where organizational learning and decision-making are collaborative.

Effort and power distance are relatively low compared to other leadership models (Dahl & Irgens, 2022). Leadership in the Nordic region places a strong emphasis on transparency, work-life balance, sustainability, and team member empowerment. The foundational principles of Nordic leadership have been shaped by the region's welfare state model and its commitment to social equality (Andreasson & Lundqvist, 2018; Møller, 2009).

Trust, which is typically contrasted with control or mistrust, is the bedrock of effective leadership. It fosters psychological safety, open communication, and team collaboration. Like Løgstrup's idea, trust manifests as mutual respect and openness between leaders and employees, creating a more democratic and participative work environment and fostering well-being in the workplace (Lundqvist et al, 2022; Brun,

2019), next to delegating responsibility and giving employees significant autonomy, expecting them to act with integrity and accountability. For this reason, Nordic organizations or teaming often resembles what Amy Edmondson named "psychological safety, "which involves but goes beyond interpersonal trust; it describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves. In the context of Nordic leadership, psychological safety refers to a work environment where employees feel secure taking risks, asking questions, and admitting mistakes without fear of punishment or humiliation (Kahn, 1990). In Nordic organizations, leaders foster psychological safety by creating an inclusive culture where employees' voices are heard and valued. This culture of openness and trust leads to higher engagement and productivity.

Empowerment, a cornerstone of trust in Nordic leadership, is a testament to leaders' faith in their employees to make independent decisions. This empowerment not only encourages creativity and ownership over their work but also makes employees feel deeply valued and integral to the organizational success they contribute to (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014; Thyssen, 2009).

Trust plays a critical role in driving innovation within Nordic organizations. High levels of trust allow for experimentation and innovation, as employees feel confident that their leaders will support them even if their ideas fail (Nielsen et al, 2012). This environment is essential for fostering creativity and continuous improvement, particularly in industries facing rapid technological change.

Furthermore, research shows that countries with high levels of societal trust tend to produce leaders who reflect this cultural value in their leadership styles (Fukuyama, 1995). Trust within these societies reduces the need for rigid control mechanisms, allowing for greater flexibility and innovation in leadership.

Nordic leaders prioritize transparency and open communication to build and maintain trust. Regular dialogue, honest feedback, and inclusive decision-making reinforce trust between leaders and their teams (Brun, 2019). This approach contrasts with more hierarchical models of leadership, where decisions are made at the top and trust is built through loyalty and deference (Romme, 2021; Hofstede, 2010). Another challenge regarding trust is globalization, where companies encounter employees and leaders from cultures with different attitudes toward trust, hierarchy, and autonomy. The transition from a high-trust culture to one with lower levels of institutional or interpersonal trust can create friction and misunderstandings, necessitating adjustments in leadership style that aim at "securing some accurate real (trustful) knowledge of the person or situation" (Fairholm, 1994, p. 13). The problem with gaining such "trustful" knowledge is, referring to Løgstrup, Edmonson, and Kahn, that trust presupposes an acceptance of one's vulnerability. This emphasis on transparency and open communication provides a sense of Reassurance and security in the leadership approach.

In psychological flexibility, a leader's willingness to acknowledge their vulnerability without defensiveness allows for greater openness and adaptability. This concept, rooted in Acceptance and

Commitment Therapy (ACT), emphasizes accepting uncomfortable thoughts and emotions, such as the uncertainty and risks inherent in leadership, while committing to actions that align with one's values. The goal of ACT, therefore, is not to reduce or eliminate complicated feelings, but rather to be present with what life offers and commit to meaningful actions that align with our values (Hayes et al, 1999).

The thesis underlying this paper is that Nordic leaders, despite their trust-based approach to securing psychological safety, embody psychological flexibility by staying present, embracing uncertainty, and empowering teams to take risks, all essential to fostering an environment of psychological safety and continuous innovation. Especially here, regarding flexibility, the three C is becoming more apparent; for example, committed action means "doing what it takes to live by our values even if that brings up pain and discomfort" (Harris, 2009, p. 11). This commitment to their values reassures the audience of the integrity and reliability of Nordic leaders.

Psychological safety in Nordic leadership is underpinned by mutual respect and trust, enabling employees to take risks without fear of retribution. Such an environment closely mirrors the concept of psychological flexibility in ACT, where individuals learn to accept discomfort and uncertainty while staying committed to their core values. Leaders who cultivate psychological flexibility foster a workplace where employees feel safe to innovate, ask questions, and grow from their mistakes. By accepting their vulnerability and remaining open to others' perspectives, Nordic leaders build trust and create an adaptive, resilient team dynamic that thrives in complexity.

### 3. Method, Data, and Analysis

Over the past three decades, qualitative studies in leadership research have significantly transformed, primarily due to their 'sensitivity to context' (Bryman et al., 1996). Qualitative methods, with their ability to delve into how leaders and followers make sense of their experiences, have opened new vistas of understanding that more rigid, quantitative approaches might overlook.

One influential example is Weick's sensemaking theory, a deeply human-centric approach emphasizing how individuals create meaning from their experiences (Brown et al., 2025). Sensemaking is about identifying facts and understanding how individuals construct their reality. Another approach is narrative inquiry, which delves into the human experience, exploring how individuals make sense of their lives through storytelling (Clandinin, 2022). Narrative inquiry captures the complexity of human experience, providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of leadership.

A third example is phenomenological research, which can be described as follows: "For phenomenology, there are no 'mere' appearances, and nothing is 'just' an appearance. Appearances are real; they belong to being. Things do show up. Pictures, words, symbols, perceived objects, states of affairs, other minds, laws, and social conventions are all acknowledged as truly there, sharing in being and capable of appearing according to their proper style" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 15).

The demand is that "each experience must be taken in its own right as it shows itself and as one is conscious of it. When a person is conscious of a table in a room, or a

mathematical theorem, both are things of which he is aware and must be taken as they appear to consciousness" (Stewart, Mickunas, 1990, pp. 22, 23).

Phenomenology is concerned with understanding and describing any aspects of life. Here, the anecdote can serve as an illustrative story and a methodological tool that gives researchers access to individuals' concrete, lived experiences. As Van Manen (1997a) explains, "An anecdote can be understood as a methodological device in human science to make comprehensible some notion that easily eludes us" (p. 116). For instance, it can help clarify complex emotions like 'trust', 'fear', or 'hope'. Anecdotes allow for reflection and appropriation of experience by clarifying elusive concepts, making visible aspects of life that are often taken for granted. In this study, I use a personal anecdote of leadership to highlight the underlying structures of the 'Nordic leadership style' as it is experienced. Such an anecdote is not merely a narrative—it is a powerful methodological tool that reveals pre-reflective experiences that we live through but rarely articulate. By recounting this experience, I aim to illuminate core qualities of Nordic leadership, including calmness, concentration, and 'coldness,' which might otherwise escape formal theoretical description.

Edmund Husserl's maxim guides a researcher applying phenomenology: "Back to the 'things themselves.'" As Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2020, p. 7) explain, phenomenology should "base its considerations on the way things are experienced rather than on various extraneous concerns which might simply

obscure and distort what is to be understood." In other words, phenomenology prioritizes the how of experience over the what, focusing on the lived experience of individuals rather than abstract concepts or external interpretations.

This study focuses on the lived experience of the Spanish woman and me, exploring how concepts like 'coldness,' 'calmness,' and 'concentration' emerge within Nordic leadership. However, the challenge is to avoid various "extraneous concerns" that might distort this experience. Van Manen (1997b, p. 41) provides further insight, drawing on Van den Berg's observation that phenomena "have something to say to us—this is common knowledge among poets and painters. Therefore, poets and painters are born phenomenologists."

This poetic understanding suggests that phenomenology is a method of description and interpretation, allowing lived experiences to speak. When phenomenological research uses anecdotes to explore meanings embedded in experience, it enters a poetic and hermeneutic tradition, creating a space to interpret those experiences.

For instance, by reflecting on the personal anecdote of Nordic leadership, I engage in a hermeneutic process, interpreting how 'coldness,' 'calmness,' and 'Concentration' manifests not only as leadership qualities but also as more profound metaphors for psychological states, cultural traits, and leadership archetypes. The phenomenological use of the anecdote is not about representing these qualities as fixed traits but about exploring how they are experienced and understood in context. To deepen this exploration, I draw on Roland

Barthes' (1981) concepts of *studium* and *punctum* from *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*.

According to Barthes, "*studium*" represents a photograph's general, cultural, or historical interest—the public and shared realm of understanding. "The *studium* is that which is a general interest, it is the cultural, the political, the historical interest in the photograph" (Barthes, 1981, p. 27).

In contrast, "*punctum*" is a photograph's personal and emotional dimension, the element that "pierces" or "wounds" the viewer, creating a direct, intimate connection. "The *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes, 1981, p. 26). It is a subtle detail that stands out and resonates with the viewer on a deeply personal level.

This concept is particularly relevant to the anecdote of Nordic leadership. When the Spanish woman referred to Nordic leadership, something in her words, "pierced" me, much like Barthes' *punctum*. I could not immediately articulate what stood out, but it revealed a different way of experiencing and understanding leadership. The terms 'coldness,' 'calmness,' and 'concentration' became more than just descriptive words—they became keys to a deeper, more embodied understanding of leadership.

To further clarify this approach, we can draw a parallel to Roland Barthes' concepts of *studium* and *punctum* in photography. Just as a literature review that sets the scene can be seen as a form of *studium*—providing context, structure, and general understanding—an anecdote serves as *punctum*, the personal element that

resonates with the reader, often unexpectedly, sparking their curiosity and engagement. This dual approach enriches our understanding by combining the general with the particular, the theoretical with the lived.

From a phenomenological perspective, leadership is not merely a collection of abstract traits but is embodied and lived. The anecdote provides insight into how leaders embody the qualities of 'calmness,' 'concentration,' and 'coldness'—how these qualities manifest in their interactions with others. This embodiment aligns with phenomenology's focus on lived experience, where a leader's presence, actions, and decisions become central to realizing values like trust, autonomy, and empowerment in practice, making the audience feel connected and involved in the leadership process.

The anecdote I present captures how one person describes a particular geographic leadership style (Nordic leadership) and reveals how this style is both straightforward and commonsense, yet ambiguous. The terms 'calm,' 'concentration,' and 'coldness' can be interpreted in multiple ways: As metaphors, coldness might refer to rational detachment or clarity, calmness to emotional stability and composure, and concentration to focus and discipline in leadership. These interpretations challenge the audience's preconceived notions and stimulate their intellectual curiosity.

As traits or archetypes, the three Cs refer to qualities that leaders embody, representing ideals they aspire to. Psychological states or dispositions refer to mindsets or attitudes that help leaders navigate complex situations. Last, as cultural markers, concepts that reflect values

potentially embedded in Scandinavian cultures or leadership philosophies.

In this sense, the anecdote is not simply a description—it is a site of interpretation, a narrative that allows for reflection on leadership qualities. As Van Manen (1989, p. 232) observes, "It is worth noting that in everyday life, the anecdote is probably the most common device by which people talk about their experiences... anecdotal narrative allows the person to reflect concretely on experience and thus appropriate that experience. To anecdote is to reflect, to think."

Ultimately, the anecdote illustrates the complexity of Nordic leadership, where concepts like 'calm,' 'concentration,' and 'coldness' are not fixed traits but dynamic qualities that can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on context, perspective, and experience. For example, from a Nordic perspective, there might be nothing cold about what the Spanish woman called cold.

## 4. Result and Discussion

### 4.1. Result

This paper asserts that the most essential leadership question is: "Does a decision contribute to a life worth living?" As Friedrich Nietzsche (1998, p. 6) famously stated, "If you have your why for life, then you can get along with almost any how." Much like life, leadership is anchored in this principle of an "organizing idea," as Nietzsche called it—what modern leadership often refers to as purpose. However, for Nietzsche, purpose should not be confused with mere will or intention. Instead, it emerges gradually through failures, mistakes, and experiments (i.e., a willingness to be vulnerable).

There is a certain coldness and calmness in this explorative, patient approach. Rather than forcing outcomes, the leader remains receptive to experience, allowing purpose to take shape over time. For example, a leader's decisions must align with a greater vision, contributing to a life and leadership style worth pursuing. A cold and calm leader embodies resilience precisely because they have endured the hardship of arriving at their organizing idea. In Nietzschean terms, they can "endure the how" because there "why" is clear.

In this context, coldness does not imply emotional detachment or lack of empathy. Instead, it refers to the ability to experience what is happening in the moment without judgment, embracing reality as it is. It is a principle of action where a leader maintains integrity by not compromising values, such as equality, even when pressured to favor one group over another.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (2014, p. 4) defines it, "Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." A cold leader embodies this principle, accepting what happens without seeking to control the uncontrollable, staying grounded and purposeful. This acceptance is foundational to psychological flexibility, a core concept in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Psychological flexibility is "the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends" (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 7).

## 1. Coldness

A cold leader, then, is not indifferent but grounded. They maintain their presence and

focus on what truly matters, even in adversity. In doing so, they cultivate a unique leadership style that embodies freedom. Where freedom is what you do with what has been done to you. It is not something you possess but something you become through your actions.

Leadership grounded in this cold and calm acceptance provides clarity and resilience, allowing decisions to contribute meaningfully to a life worth living. At its most basic, "cold" refers to neither good nor bad temperature. Whether cold is desirable depends on context; for example, one might prefer a warm coffee but a cold beer. Nevertheless, the term is often used metaphorically, where "warm" suggests caring, compassionate, empathetic, and loving qualities, while "cold" is associated with rationality, detachment, or even psychopathy.

However, is warmth always better than coldness, even for leaders? This section challenges the traditional bias that warmth is superior, exploring how coldness, when understood as clear-sightedness, calmness, and resilience, may be an essential quality of effective leadership. The following sections will further examine how this concept interacts with calmness and concentration, revealing a deeper understanding of Nordic leadership.

Martha Nussbaum (1979, pp. 150–151) critiques Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, describing him as "weird" and almost statue-like, emotionally stone-cold. According to Nussbaum, Socrates is overly rational, dismissing passion and lust as inferior. She argues that Socrates has "dissociated himself from his body so that he genuinely does not feel its pain or regard its sufferings as things

genuinely happening to him." This portrayal highlights a classical philosophical dichotomy: reason versus passion, thinking versus feeling, cold versus warm.

While Nussbaum's compelling critique raises an intriguing paradox: Can coldness have warmth? A stone can be warm, and passion can also be cold. Did not Truman Capote write about the brutal murder of a family in *In Cold Blood*? In this sense, coldness need not be synonymous. With indifference, it can be a form of clarity, focus, and restraint, a paradox that invites further exploration.

Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein, we understand that meaning is determined by use, and use is shaped by context. This paper's context is leadership mentality, specifically, a leadership style as a way of being. Here, I use the term "cold" to describe an ability to experience what is happening in the moment without judgment, embracing what is.

For example, a person may prefer cold over warm, but the temperature is unaffected by their preference. Coldness becomes a metaphor for acceptance—the willingness to face and engage with reality without distortion. It includes recognizing and accepting what is beyond our control, such as the rules of a game, the weather, or the attitudes of others. However, it also involves the humility to recognize that understanding is not the same as justifying. For instance, I must understand why some people discriminate to convince them to stop effectively.

A cold leader is not indifferent but rather embodies a form of curious compassion. They maintain their presence and openness,

even in the face of another's suffering, without being overwhelmed. The Latin root of compassion, *compati* (com + pati), means "to suffer with" (Ribaudi, 2016, p. 43). This understanding of compassion highlights a critical point: it is not about taking on another's suffering as one's own, but about staying present and supportive. Furthermore, compassion is related to acceptance (Linehan, 2014) because suffering with or accompanied by others is more manageable when one accepts what happens.

Research in mindfulness and compassion (Gilbert, 2009; Neff, 2003) has shown that compassion can be trained and allows one to accompany another's suffering without becoming consumed. For example, Kristin Neff (2003) defines self-compassion through three interrelated elements: 1) Self-Kindness: Treating oneself with understanding and warmth rather than harsh self-criticism; 2) Common Humanity: Recognizing that suffering is part of the shared human experience; 3) Mindfulness: Observing thoughts and feelings without being swept away by them. These principles help clarify that coldness in leadership is not about detachment but maintaining a balanced response to suffering, both one's own and others. This concept of compassion in leadership can be further understood as a process that unfolds in three stages:

1. Awareness: The leader knows that another person is suffering, including themselves. They recognize suffering without immediately reacting.
2. Acceptance: The leader mentally steps back, recognizing that suffering is an unavoidable part of life. This is where coldness comes in—not as

indifference but as a pause, a reflective space. Acceptance, a key quality in effective leadership, allows leaders to respond thoughtfully and compassionately.

3. Action: The leader considers the best action to minimize or heal the suffering. This may involve listening, providing support, or making a difficult decision. The action phase in leadership is crucial, as it demonstrates the leader's commitment to alleviating suffering and promoting a positive environment.

This process is similar to Rollo May's (1994, p. 100) description of human freedom: "Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the response toward which we wish to throw our weight. A cold leader, then, is not merely an emotionless figure but someone who possesses the freedom to choose their response with clarity and compassion. Their leadership style is marked by a unique combination of resilience, focus, and a willingness to embrace reality without distortion. Through this coldness, the leader develops a unique style because they act with self-awareness.

## 2. Calmness

Calmness can be seen as a natural outcome of coldness—a state of being free from emotional distraction. However, while a calm person can remain present with what is happening, this does not mean they are untouched or indifferent. On the contrary, a calm person stands before the world unarmed, open, and vulnerable, ready to be affected, touched, or even transformed by what unfolds. Calmness is not a form of

withdrawal but a way of staying receptive without immediate judgment.

A calm leader refuses to judge prematurely. They remain present because they have trained mentally and emotionally to be mindful and compassionate (Kabat-Zinn, 2014; Janning, 2018). Mindfulness, which involves observing without judgment, aligns closely with the concept of coldness discussed earlier. A calm leader can embrace what happens without being swept away by it.

In the context of leadership, this cold and calm presence is foundational to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which emphasizes psychological flexibility—the ability to fully experience the present moment, even in adversity, while committing to values-driven action (Hayes et al., 2006). A leader who cultivates this calm presence can maintain focus on what truly matters, even under pressure.

## 3. Concentration

Calmness naturally leads to concentration—the capacity to focus on a task or situation without distraction. Concentration is not merely a matter of discipline; it is a matter of clarity. It is the ability to answer fundamental questions like:

- "Why are you here and not somewhere else?"
- "Why are you doing what you are doing and not something else?"

In this sense, concentration is not just a skill but a state of being fully present, of having one's mind where one's feet are. It means staying engaged with the present moment, whatever that may bring.

Nordic people may not be inherently better or worse at concentration than others, but the concept of coldness can be seen as an aid to concentration. Coldness, as a form of clear-sightedness, allows one to focus on what truly matters without being swayed by unnecessary distractions. This is because when one is 'cold,' they are not emotionally influenced by external factors, allowing them to concentrate on the task.

This understanding opens a pathway to a deeper ethical perspective. In classical Greek philosophy, two aphorisms guide personal growth: "Know yourself" and "Take care of yourself." However, a third, less recognized principle is "Know your place."

This does not mean knowing one's socio-economic, racial, or cultural status, but rather being consciously aware of one's situation—knowing where you are, what you are doing, and how your actions align with your values. If I am cycling home and it begins to rain, I can remain calm, knowing I will get wet. Refusing to complain about the weather might be seen as cold, but passionate anger at the sky will not stop the rain.

Concentration means being aware of one's place, both physically and mentally. A leader's concentration is reflected in questions like:

- "Is my mind where my feet are?"
- "Am I present?"
- "Do I pay attention to what takes place, or have I lost my calmness and started judging before understanding?"

If not, this loss of focus may be a sign of a missing "why"—as Nietzsche

emphasized—or a drift into meaningless activity.

#### 4.2. Discussion

Mindfulness is often described as awareness of the present moment. However, this awareness is not just about noticing but about remembering. Remembering where you are, your purpose, and what truly matters (Goldstein, 2013). For a leader, this means standing openly before life, embracing both the predictable and the unexpected.

Authentic leadership demands courage to confront reality without evasion or manipulation. This courage is not just about confidence, but about becoming deserving of what unfolds. Instead of shying away from challenging situations, a composed, calm, and focused leader accepts them as they are, responding with integrity and clarity. In *The Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze (2004, p. 169) underscores this notion: "Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us." For Deleuze, this ethical stance is not about passivity. It is about being transformed by events rather than trying to control them. As he further clarifies: "To become worthy of what happens to us, and thus to will and release the event... to become the offspring of one's event and not of one's action." (Deleuze, 2004, p. 170).

A leader who is cold, calm, and concentrated does not attempt to control reality but instead seeks to understand and respond to it with integrity. This attitude may be what the Spanish woman recognized as part of the Nordic mentality—a leadership style that is clear, composed, and deeply

rooted in reality. However, even the most concentrated, calm, and nuanced leader will make mistakes. Why? Because it is impossible to remain perfectly composed forever. Leadership is not a matter of perfection but of engagement—of staying and learning from what happens.

This paper argues that vulnerability is a source of strength rather than a weakness. Vulnerability is directly connected to trust, a fundamental aspect of psychological safety. Leaders who can accept their vulnerability—acknowledging mistakes without being paralyzed by them—can cultivate a culture where their team feels safe to take risks and grow.

As Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) underscores, psychological flexibility is the ability to remain open to discomfort while acting under core values (Lloyd et al., 2013; Janning, 2022). This flexibility involves acknowledging the inevitability of mistakes and uncertainty without losing sight of what truly matters. It is a mindset that turns setbacks into opportunities for growth.

- Awareness: The leader becomes aware of their own suffering or mistakes.
- Acceptance: The leader steps back mentally, recognizing that mistakes are part of growth.
- Action: The leader recalibrates and continues, guided by their values.

This process allows a leader to be cold (clear and focused), calm (present and composed), and concentrated (engaged and purposeful), even in challenging situations. ACT further suggests that psychological flexibility is not just about staying calm but

about maintaining compassion for oneself and others. This is where the idea of coldness as compassion re-emerges. A leader who is 'cold' in this context is not indifferent or unfeeling, but has learned to accompany others without becoming overwhelmed by their suffering. This form of compassion, grounded in clarity and focus, allows leaders to maintain their composure and make sound decisions, even in challenging situations. It echoes May's "pause between stimulus and response," where we choose to respond wisely.

This pause is not a sign of hesitation but of clarity. It is the moment when a leader decides how best to respond, even when faced with uncertainty or adversity. A leader who can accept and work with their vulnerability—rather than trying to deny or escape it—becomes a model of resilience for their team.

To become worthy of what happens means developing a mindset where one does not merely react but responds with awareness and integrity. It is a mode of existence that involves:

- Recognizing that some things cannot be controlled (illness, aging, death).
- Refusing to accept what should not be tolerated (discrimination, injustice, hate).
- Staying present in the face of uncertainty, focusing on what is essential.

This is not a passive surrender to circumstances. It is an active engagement with life, an attempt to create value even in difficult situations. This way, leaders learn to be cold, calm, and concentrated without becoming disconnected.

However, how can leaders know if they are truly worthy of what happens? One practical test asks: Would I be willing to repeat this action? Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, this question forces leaders to consider whether their choices are worth repeating.

- If I lead with honesty, fairness, and courage would I want to repeat that?
- If I make a decision that aligns with my values—would I stand by it again?

Leaders who lack a clear sense of what matters often find it difficult to say no, becoming distracted or manipulated. In contrast, leaders who are cold, calm, and concentrated are not afraid to make decisions they would willingly repeat. This reflection echoes the very essence of Nordic leadership: a leadership style that is clear, composed, and grounded in values.

## 5. Conclusion and Suggestion

Leadership, as explored in this paper, is not a static quality but an ongoing process of becoming, of remaining open, resilient, and ethically grounded. Leaders are cold because they accept that leadership is always in flux, constantly transforming through experience. They are calm because they acknowledge their limitations, vulnerabilities, and insecurities without being overwhelmed. They concentrate because they continually question, test, and explore whether they focus on what truly matters. Each decision becomes an opportunity to ask: "Is this worth repeating?" or "Is this sustainable?"

This perspective aligns with the principles of psychological flexibility, which is central to Nordic leadership. In a high-trust environment, psychological flexibility allows

leaders to embrace vulnerability, accept uncertainty, and commit to fostering psychological safety. However, this flexibility is not merely a personal trait but a foundational principle that shapes organizational culture. It encourages leaders and employees alike to navigate the complexities of modern organizations with resilience, creativity, and mutual trust.

Becoming worthy of what happens is a concept that extends beyond leadership. It is an ethical imperative—a way of engaging with life itself. It means approaching each situation with an open mind, problematizing assumptions, exploring possibilities, and being willing to learn. For leaders, this means paying attention to how they act, testing their beliefs, and refining their understanding of what is essential.

However, the concept of 'becoming worthy' is not confined to Nordic leadership; it is a universal ethical challenge. It calls on leaders worldwide to help others live lives worth living by achieving results and cultivating environments where individuals can grow, question, and create. This emphasis on its universal nature makes the audience feel included and part of a global ethical community.

It is about nurturing a culture where even minor differences can alter perspectives, leading to continuous improvement and deeper understanding.

While this paper has explored the qualities of coldness, calmness, and concentration as central to a resilient and ethical leadership style, several areas for future research remain:

1. Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Exploring how the concepts of coldness, calmness, and concentration are understood and applied in non-Nordic leadership cultures.
2. Psychological Flexibility in Leadership: Investigating how psychological flexibility can be cultivated in leaders across various industries and how it impacts team performance and well-being.
3. Measuring Worthiness: Developing qualitative and quantitative measures to assess whether leaders' decisions align with the principle of "becoming worthy of what happens."
4. Ethical Decision-Making: Examining how leaders can balance cold objectivity with warm empathy in complex, morally challenging situations.

Ultimately, becoming worthy of what happens is not just a path to becoming a better leader – it is a path to becoming a more mindful, resilient, and ethically grounded human being. The profound fulfillment that comes with becoming worthy is not simply a personal achievement; it is a contribution to a life worth living for oneself and others.

## References

Amundsen, S., & Martinsen, Ø. L. (2014). Empowering leadership: Construct clarification, conceptualization, and validation of a new scale. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(3), 487-511. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lequa.2013.11.009>.

Andreasson, U. & Lundqvist, M. (2018). Nordic Leadership. *Nordic Council of Minister, Analysis no. 02/2018*.

Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*. Hill and Wang.

Brun, P. H. (2019). *On the move: Lessons for the future from Nordic leaders*. People's Press.

Bryman, A., Stephens, M., & Campo, C. (1996). The importance of context: Qualitative research and the study of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 7(3), 353-370. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843\(96\)90025-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(96)90025-9).

Clandinin, D.J. (2022). *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003240143>.

Dahl, T., & Irgens, E. J. (2022). Organizational learning the Nordic way: Learning through participation. *The Learning Organization*, 29(3), 229-242. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-05-2021-0065>.

Deleuze, G. (2004). *The Logic of Sense*. Translated by M. Lester with C. Stivale. Continuum.

Edmondson, A. (1999). "Psychological Safety" and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 350-383.

Erjansola, A.-M. (2024, October 22). *Nordic leadership in the age of transitions: Trust, fairness, and procedural justice*. Aalto Leaders' Insight. <https://www.aaltoee.fi/en/aalto-leaders-insight/2024/nordic-leadership-in-the-age-of-transitions-trust-fairness-and-procedural-justice>.

Fairholm, G. W. (1994). *Leadership and the culture of trust*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. Free Press.

Gallagher, S., & Zahavi, D. (2020). *The Phenomenological Mind* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429319792>

Gilbert, P. (2009). *The compassionate mind: A new approach to facing the challenges of life*. Constable Robinson.

Goldstein, J. (2013). *Mindfulness. A Practical Guide to Awakening*. Sounds True.

Harris, R. (2009). *ACT made simple*. New Harbinger Publications.

Hayes, S. C., Luoma, J. B., Bond, F. W., Masuda, A., & Lillis, J. (2006). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Model, processes and outcomes. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44(1), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2005.06.006>.

Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An Experiential Approach to Behavior Change*. Guilford Press.

Hofstede, G. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. McGraw-Hill.

Janning, F. (2018). Compassion: Toward an ethics of mindfulness. *Mindfulness & Compassion*, 3(1), 25-46.

Janning, F. (2022). Accepting vulnerability: Towards a mindful sport philosophy. *Journal of Applied Sports Sciences*, 6(2), 119-126. <https://doi.org/10.37393/JASS.2022.029>.

Janning, F., Khalif, W., & Ingle, C. (2020). *The illusion of transparency in corporate governance: Does transparency help or hinder true ethical conduct?* Springer International Publishing.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. Hyperion.

Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions

of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692-724. <https://doi.org/10.2307/256287>.

Linehan, M.M. (2014). *DBT Skills Training Manual*. Guilford Press.

Lloyd, J., Bond, F. W., & Flaxman, P. E. (2013). The value of psychological flexibility: Examining psychological mechanisms underpinning a cognitive behavioral therapy intervention for burnout. *Work & Stress*, 27(2), 181-199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2013.788097>.

Løgstrup, K. E. (1997). *The Ethical Demand*. University of Notre Dame Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj7dd8>.

Lundqvist, D., Reineholm, C., & Ståhl, C. (2022). The impact of leadership on employee well-being: On-site compared to working from home. *BMC Public Health*, 22, Article 2154. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14634-2>

Malabou, C. (2013). Go wonder: Subjectivity and affects in neurobiological times. In C. Malabou & A. Johnston (Eds.), *Self and emotional life* (pp. 3-63). Columbia University Press.

Mead, M. (2001). *Sex and temperament: In three primitive societies*. Harper Perennial.

Møller, J. (2009). Approaches to school leadership in Scandinavia. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 41(2), 165-177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620902808244>

Neff, K. D. (2003). Self-Compassion: An Alternative Conceptualization of a Healthy Attitude Toward Oneself. *Self and Identity*, 2(2), 85-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860309032>

Nielsen, P., Nielsen, R. N., Bamberger, S. G., Stamhus, J., Fonager, K., Larsen, A., Vinding, A. L., Ryom, P. K., & Omland, Ø. (2012). Capabilities for innovation: The Nordic model and employee participation. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 2(4), 85-115.

Nietzsche, F. (1998). *Twilight of idols* (D. Large, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Nussbaum, M. (1979). The speech of Alcibiades: A reading of the Symposium. *Philosophy and Literature*, 3(2), 131-172. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1979.0024>.

Phenomenology + pedagogy, volume 7, 232-253.

Ribaudi, J. S. (2016). Compasión y autocompasión: Definición, constructo y medidas. In J. García-Campayo, A. Cebolla i Martí, & M. Demarzo (Eds.), *La ciencia de la compasión*. Alianza Editorial.

Rollo, M. (1994). *The Courage to Create*. Norton & Company.

Romme, A. G. L. (2021). Ladders of Authority, Status, Responsibility and Ideology: Toward a Typology of Hierarchy in Social Systems. *Systems*, 9(1), 20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/systems9010020>

Sahlins, M. (2023). *The new science of the enchanted universe: An anthropology of most of humanity*. Princeton University Press.

Sokolowski, R. (2000). *Introduction to phenomenology*. Cambridge University Press.

Stewart, D., & Mickunas, A. (1990). *Exploring phenomenology: A guide to the field and its literature* (2nd ed.). Ohio University Press.

Thyssen, O. (2009). *Business ethics and organizational values: A systems theoretical analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Van Manen, M. (1989). *By Light of Anecdote*.

Van Manen, M. (1997a). *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. London: Althouse Press.

Van Manen, M. (1997b). Phenomenological pedagogy and the question of meaning. In D. Vandenberg (Ed.), *Phenomenology & education discourse* (pp. 41-68). Heinemann.