Europe is first and foremost an intellectual concept. Since Greco-Roman antiquity, various myths, peace projects, and crises have been associated with it, and there have been geographical, political, and economic attempts to contain it. Increasingly, Europe is about collective experiences and the strengthening of cultural ties. In current models of thought generally, the European idea has become important as an identity-creating space of experiences and values.
Under the international law of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, the Member States of the European Union emphasized and laid down six particular values for Europe: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. This set of values can be seen as the expression of a common decision-making process and, through its inclusion in the Treaty, it has provided the European Union with guidance for action. Given that violations of these fundamental values can be punished by the suspension of EU membership, the scope of this commitment is clear.

Today, these shared values form fundamental axes in European countries’ political and legal systems. In the global community, they are likely to prove an advantage in terms of cultural survival, if they can be successfully promoted and implemented in the population at large.

However, from a sociological and psychological point of view, we must always re-examine how these values are actually lived and what effect they have in the world of experience. Without an inner affirmation, even the best idea remains an intellectual construct unconnected to emotions and motivations. It is a simple thing, but hard to do. Acting upon it is a Sisyphian task, but it is essential.
Decision-makers in politics, businesses, and organizations in particular are required to use their behavior to create incentives, exploit potential, and moderate responsibly in situations where conflicts and areas of tension arise. The social elites especially must be able to explain why they are doing what they are doing.

The fundamental European values go hand-in-hand with tolerance, justice, solidarity, and other Humanist values. While this range of values may sound easy to endorse, its implementation is subject to many conditions and freighted with conflict. A mechanism is therefore required that goes beyond or complements principle-based evaluations. Thinking in terms of dilemmas and the associated idea of choosing the lesser evil quickly runs up against limits in a world of plural values in which contradictions and paradoxes must inevitably be tolerated.

In this essay, I would like to use concepts from role theory to show how executives can deal with irreconcilable contradictions and value conflicts. The answer lies in the maintenance of one’s own identity through sovereign role distance. Humanist values are most likely enforceable when the actors involved consistently address their own values and acknowledge what is right or wrong from their point of view. A certain amount of distance is required in order to be able to
look at oneself from within the role, and to look at the role from within oneself.

Put negatively, what appears to be a lack of identification with the task or the values, is in positive terms the key to good self-leadership and thus a prerequisite for good leadership in general. The Leipzig Leadership Model serves as the basis for these ideas.

EUROPEAN VALUES IN THE LEIPZIG LEADERSHIP MODEL

There is no European style of leadership as the intellectual traditions are too diverse. However, it could be worthwhile to make use of the inherently Humanist orientation of fundamental European values to create an image of “good leadership.” One current example of this is the Leipzig Leadership Model (LLM) which translates culturally deep-rooted, historical European values into issues of leadership. These values include the balance between freedom and responsibility, a personal commitment to liberal ideas that can be adhered to, and the quest for the common good in the area of tension between autonomy and dependence.

The premises of the LLM include a concept of the individual that is characterized by respect for the
dignity of each person and their right to personal freedom and participation. This is underpinned by a normative starting point, which asserts that it is a great achievement of civilization that in a liberal system people can determine their own goals, and the latter are not prescribed from above. Without a broad consensus about the requirements of a functioning society, however, this is not viable and the individual cannot thrive.

This model can also be applied to companies and other organizations that need a license to operate in order to achieve long-term effectiveness. Entrepreneurial freedom and responsibility are mutually dependent and should go hand-in-hand from the start. The very European notion of placing business thinking and activities at the service of society resonates in these ideas, for example in the role model of the “honorable merchant,” as seen in medieval Italy and the north German cities of the Hanseatic League in the territory of present-day Europe.

In the LLM, these intellectual traditions have been incorporated and contextualized in social scientific terms:

The model also goes hand-in-hand with the conviction that, in a fundamentally unmanageable world, it is important to remain capable of acting and to develop
an attitude that is defined by a value contribution and not by status, knowledge, or power. Conversely, the model offers a way of giving meaning to one’s own status, knowledge, or power.\textsuperscript{2}

A value contribution arises from concrete action: whoever contributes, leads. Those who do not contribute, do not lead; or, if you want to lead, you have to contribute. Seeing yourself as part of a greater whole and finding your own role within it focuses simultaneously on self-commitment and self-transcendence.

In the LLM, executives (of the future) are encouraged not only to base their social role on the expectations of colleagues and the organization, but also on the needs of society as a whole, and to see themselves as the recipient of social role expectations. In this context, Peter Drucker, the father of modern management studies, spoke about the “social function” that is inherent in every leadership function.\textsuperscript{3} It is particularly important for executives to accept the social expectations associated with their role and to embody this role.

In this model, integrated thinking in general stands for the European tradition of thought. Put simply, an executive should always ask themselves four questions and be able to find coherent solutions:
1. Purpose (why?): Are we pursuing an overarching goal?

2. Entrepreneurial spirit (how?): Are we thinking and acting in an entrepreneurial way?

3. Responsibility (how?): Are our activities legitimate?

4. Effectiveness (what?): Are we effective?

The purpose of good leadership focuses on social issues. This contribution logic transforms the question of “why?” into the question of “what for?”. Internal affirmation and (self-) determination lead to the question of what it means for a greater whole. A purpose does not exist for its own sake. It cannot focus solely on the individualistic self, but seeks fulfillment by contributing to the broadest possible primary principle, the common good. The answer to “why” therefore remains incomplete unless it includes the view from outside.

The conflicts inherent in such a holistic approach are obvious. While leadership that focuses on effectiveness is more geared towards optimizing existing processes, leadership in the spirit of entrepreneurship emphasizes creative freedom and the necessary
willingness to take risks to develop new processes. And not every purpose can be implemented in a responsible manner. A purpose that can only be achieved through irresponsible action is prohibited. The “how” of the responsibility dimension is therefore not strictly subordinate to the “why” and/or “what for,” but it restricts it as well. This guideline informs the principle of *primum non nocere*, borrowed from the Hippocratic Oath and applied to leadership challenges.

In practice, it is not always possible to find a balance between the areas of tension brought into focus by this approach to leadership and find beneficial solutions. A compromise based on mutual respect does not mean capitulating to reality, but rather is a considerable achievement within the framework of the fundamental European values we mentioned above, an achievement in which values cannot simply be played off against each other—not freedom or equality, but freedom and equality.

In the event of a conflict or even a crisis, the immediate challenge for an executive is to get a grip and find their bearings, because only if one’s own activity chimes with one’s self-image can one’s own actions make sense, and only then can one serve as a role model for others. By engaging with the LLM in their curriculum, students rehearse how European values
can be lived out in day-to-day leadership. Finding the ideal solution is not the most important thing, but rather a feeling for the right questions that focus one’s own attention on what is feasible.

THE SOCIAL ROLE BETWEEN ELEMENTARY CATEGORY AND BEHAVIORAL SHELL

In today’s postmodern world, we emphasize the scope available for creating social roles. Everything seems possible; everything is a question of attribution and individual initiative. But in so doing we occasionally overlook the fact that, in addition to any subjective determination and individual interpretation of roles, objective circumstances also limit the scope for action. This applies to the practical constraints that exist in an organizational context as a result of the legal framework or the functional context. The form in which individuality is possible is objectively specified in this sense and is not simply an attribution that might easily be changed. An executive cannot escape these expectations or just cherry-pick certain aspects of the role. Neither is the executive free from the personal biographical and cultural characteristics that they bring to their performance of the role.
In the most general way, the concept of “social role” stands for the sum of the expectations that a person in a specific social position must deal with in a social context. Role requirements describe what a person typically thinks, feels, and does and/or should do in a role. The person is confronted with requirements and, in the best-case scenario, can also “grow” as a person with the role. Roles connect the individual to their social environment, helping them to contribute to the creation of the environment. Just as the individual experiences role expectations as facilitating their orientation, so by performing their role they maintain the associated expectations and contribute to the production and reproduction of social structures.

It is not surprising that the concept of role in sociology appeared early on in the work of one of the discipline’s founding fathers, Ferdinand Tönnies. For Tönnies, the role is an intellectual artifact, through which a new element of formalization and distance in a person’s relationship with him or herself comes into play. He writes:

Every individual is the natural representative of his own person. The concept of the person cannot be derived from any other empirical egos than the individual people. For in so far as every individual is endowed with thought and will, he is perceivable.
Consequently, there are real and natural persons in so far as there exist human beings who conceive themselves as such, accept and play this “role,” each one assuming the “character” of a person like a mask held before his face.⁴

For Tönnies, the form of a role already exists within the idea of the person:

… a unity by external determination, unum per accidens, mechanical unity. That is to say, in the same way as a formation of rational will has reality and unity only for the person possessing it, and through its relation to possible results, the concept of the person is a figment, a product of scientific thought. It is intended to express the unity of the origin of such formations, i.e. the disposition of a complex of force, power, means.⁵

Just as the individual has to build a definable form of a role as part of their consistent experience as a person in order to be able to slip into a variety of social roles, a community is organized on the basis of many different roles. Role expectations create a certain degree of reliability and enable social ties. The sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf even gave this a name—homo sociologicus:

Every position carries with it certain expected modes of behavior; every position a person occupies requires him to do certain things and exhibit certain
characteristics; to every social position there belongs a social role. By assuming a social position, the individual becomes a character in the drama written by the society he is living in. With every position he assumes, society hands him a role to play.\textsuperscript{6}

It is no coincidence that Dahrendorf precedes his description with a quotation from Shakespeare:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits, and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...

\textit{(As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 7)}

Without a doubt, the concept of the role, as borrowed from the theater, offers a perspective for understanding leadership challenges. It would be an exaggeration to see the role concept alone as the one fundamental category for understanding leadership behavior or, conversely, to ignore the idea of the social role as an empty behavioral shell. Containing elements of “must,” “shall,” and “can,” role expectations are not unambiguous, nor can anyone seriously deny the reality of role effects and conflicts. Indeed, the terminology is enshrined in everyday language. We speak of “slipping
into a role,” “disappearing into a role,” “casting off a role,” or “behaving out of character.”

In any case, the separation between role and person seems appropriate for understanding situations in which different expectations collide and orientation factors do not depend solely on the participants. While a typical recommendation would be to negotiate expectations, here I would like to look at a kind of reserve capacity that exists within the person—sovereign role distance.

**ROLE DISTANCE AS A BALANCING ACT**

The contradictions that exist within all the expectations placed on executives often cannot be resolved. By this we mean both the conflict between the individual’s demands on themselves and external expectations (intra-role conflict), as well as the conflict between different expectations that are placed on a person with different roles (inter-role conflict). It is easy enough to say that the source of innovation and progress lies in the power of the conflict itself. But this requires an ability to reflect clearly about oneself, because if you cannot cope with yourself, you won’t be able to cope with others.
If the contradictions in expectations are not even noticed, there is a risk of direct identification, without maintaining any internal distance, which can lead to the individual feeling overwhelmed and being accused of submissiveness. The first step is to be aware of roles, i.e. to perceive a pattern of expectations that has been set up externally and that requires an adjustment in one’s own behavior.

A role wants to be accepted, learned, developed, and thus performed. If, in so doing, the executive experiences themselves not only as performing a role, but can also reflect as a spectator on their own behavior, then they immediately become aware that interaction with others is being mediated into becoming a certain role as a result of their own relationship, and how this happens. The social role then quickly becomes an empty behavioral shell or a character mask, which risks a weakened sense of identification with the role.

The perceived role distance between self and role can be interpreted as alienation from the role and a desire for independence from it. Perhaps the role was never seriously accepted internally or there is a basic lack of understanding of it. In a positive sense, deliberate role distance can be a sign of sovereign identification, which in itself makes it possible to react playfully and creatively to new situations. Such “role play” does
not negate the contradictions in expectations, but highlights the possibilities and limits of the role itself.

As paradoxical as it sounds, authenticity only arises when the conflicting nature of expectations is addressed. One example of this is to convincingly articulate the difference between a pragmatic solution and the noble ideals of contributing to the greater whole. The executive can be seen as a person playing a role without negating the parameters of the role. Indeed, a coherent leadership performance consists in not eliminating the distance between “role” and “true self” in one direction or the other, but in maintaining the tension and developing oneself alongside the contradictions.

Whether caused by pressure to conform or lack of a strong ego, without an inner sense of distance with regard to role expectations the individual would be completely absorbed in their role and would no longer be recognizable as an individual person. In such a case the individual is the role, and the famous “character mask” has taken root. Being consolidated in a role does not have to be a disadvantage initially, provided that fulfilling the role stabilizes self-image and is functionally important for a person (e.g. someone in a new job). In addition, only by internalizing the role can the role be managed flexibly. Or to put it another way: improvisation is the result of many hours of practice,
and an effortless ability to develop the role is the result of previous efforts. But danger also lurks here: if the role is performed without a minimum of internal sympathy and involvement, there is a risk of manipulation and deception. Professionally necessary role distance (for example in the work of doctors, therapists, or teachers) can turn into superficial role play. Too much distance leads to experiences of alienation and inner withdrawal. Above all, however, a lack of role identification is unsettling to one’s interlocutors, because they cannot rely on the certainty of expectations that the role implies.

What is required, therefore, is a constant balancing act between personal and social identity, between inner guidance and obstinacy on the one hand, and on the other the willingness to face up to the requirements of the role without any ifs or buts. In their efforts to assert their identity, the executive gives the impression “of a constantly juggling and balancing artist, an actor who can control everything on stage at one moment and then quietly steal away, a skilled dealer who secures his contracts with all kinds of get-out clauses and then puts all his eggs in one basket, almost a charlatan, who in his ambiguous comments won’t ultimately commit to anything.”

8
This balance between the portrayal of “self” and “other,” or between “mask” and “true self,” expresses the contradictory nature of expectations, norms, and perspectives that stimulates and provokes change. Consistency is created by revealing potentials and tensions. In other words, the individual overcomes psychological unease (experience of dissonance) by not fully taking on board the role requirements and/or creating distance from them. This mental mechanism of objectification increases the possibility of regaining consonance in one’s own thoughts and feelings. If this is not successful, the ability to act is lost.

However, dealing flexibly with different expectations is only productive if it creates a credible balance that can meet expectations and yet contribute something special. This means not going over the top, but rather finding the point where an executive is both like everyone else and yet completely unique—in other words successful identity work.

The famous actor Bernhard Minetti was once asked how he managed...

...to remain in the limelight in major roles across political eras and changing styles. His secret has been his versatility as an actor. Over the decades, his versatility has been nourished by his extraordinary ability to absorb inspiration from his environment, for
example by making bygone styles and fashions his own and thus shaping his personality and acting. For example, on stage he is always of the moment and at the same time an actor through whose idiosyncratic presence German theater has remained alive for almost a century... To rediscover a role, to imagine it differently from before, nourished by his curiosity for people, that is one of the driving forces of this actor, who works rationally, not from gut feeling. He sees himself as an executor of the author. Not by unreservedly identifying with his character, but by performing the character with extreme sensitivity. He is interested, he says, in “their vulnerability more than their bourgeois morality, their bourgeois truthfulness. Both chime with my fundamental feeling that we are not entirely certain of ourselves, just as the world is not certain. That sounds like evasion, like not wanting to come to grips with things. That would be the wrong conclusion. I have a great sense of responsibility, it is part of my discipline as well as my existence; [...] But I also have within me another feeling—that ultimately I cannot be grasped.”

SUMMARY: ROLE DISTANCE AS A PERFORMANCE FACTOR IN GOOD LEADERSHIP

The perception and acceptance of a basic tension between role and person is a key skill in meeting the enormous requirements of a contradictory practice.
If you do not take account of this and make use of it, you are not fully exploiting the possibilities of your own effectiveness. Undoubtedly, the ideas of social role theory prove to be a useful tool for understanding successful (self)-leadership. We can now sum up our argument: commitment to a role makes flexibility in a role possible! Only mastering a role requirement enables a real, creative development of the relationship between freedom (developing personal identity) and responsibility (implementation of the role requirement).

In short, for the kind of leadership based on European values as translated into the Leipzig Leadership Model, a constant balancing act between person and role is a necessary condition for finding innovative solutions and thus cultural viability.

The ego identity gained through awareness of one’s own and others’ expectations of one’s own role enables an executive to determine the balance between dependency and autonomy. This is what is meant by sovereign role distance: engaging with the requirements of the social role and at the same time experiencing oneself as a person with self-will. The existential experience of one’s own characteristics ("true self," "self") promotes real empathy with and humility towards others, as well as an understanding of one’s dependence on others.
Self-respect is the prerequisite and the consequence of respect for the dignity of others.

Establishing and maintaining a difference between a social role and oneself is an essential part of competent self-management. It is not about playing one against each other, but about gaining orientation by clarifying roles and the resulting degrees of freedom of thought, feeling, and acting.

If, for example, both alternatives in a decision appear to be wrong, sovereign role distance allows a creative view of how the tension inherent in the situation can be used productively and new things can be created by an intellectual combination of opposites. Overcoming “either-or” logic and/or a dilemma also requires the strength to develop and advocate one’s own values. Echoing the Kantian Enlightenment motto of sapere aude, the executive is encouraged and obliged to “think for themselves.”

Notes

2. Kirchgeorg et al., Das Leipziger Führungsmodell, p. V.


