

## The Swiss Army Knife for Leaders

A Guide to Leadership with Lasting Impact

**Gabriel Anthonio**



### Recommendation

Gabriël Anthonio traces his interest in leadership to a summer day in his youth when his grandfather handed him a Swiss Army knife. His grandfather explained that the knife and its different tools represent multiple options for dealing with life's challenges. The conversation resonated with Anthonio; here, he illustrates how leaders can metaphorically utilize the knife's implements in the workplace. Take his advice to heart, and you'll be a cut above everyone else.

### Take-Aways

- Multiple tools make you a sharper leader.
- Large blade: Major issues require decisive action.
- Small blade: Prevent little problems from growing.
- Corkscrew: Root out destructive negativity.
- Scissors: Restore balance and productivity.
- Can opener: Take off the lid and share your stories.
- Punch: Make sure everyone heads in the same direction.
- Hook: Don't lose your footing at work.
- Bottle opener: Celebrate special moments and rituals.
- Tweezers: Remove what doesn't work for you.
- Toothpick: Poke around inside.

### Summary

**Multiple tools make you a sharper leader.**

Like a Swiss Army knife with multiple tools, leaders need a multifaceted approach for dealing with various challenges and situations. You must simplify complicated problems, then find the best options for solving them. Sometimes you have to abandon familiar

behaviours and strategies that aren't working. Leadership also means regaining your feet after you've fallen.

*"Leadership, in a nutshell, is about consciously exercising influence; on yourself, on those near and dear to you, on your environment."*

Think of a Swiss Army knife, and you'll recognise the varied options it offers for working on different issues. Influential leadership doesn't always require grand gestures or seismic shifts. You can be an effective leader regardless of your situation or position. Don't wait for an emergency to work on yourself. Any time is a good time to improve your leadership skills.

### **Large blade: Major issues require decisive action.**

Using the large blade to address big issues that can't wait requires courage and conviction. Handling a serious situation that may affect many people calls for decisive action. No leader's decision to use the large blade is casual. But significant change doesn't occur in a vacuum; you need cooperation and follow-through from others. Don't allow emotions to rule your behaviour you may be tempted to take drastic measures because a situation is uncomfortable, but rushing into a major decision may make you responsible for harmful consequences. Initiate change without intentionally hurting anyone. Those affected should understand the seriousness of the problem and your strategy for fixing it. Create a culture of honesty and inclusiveness, not intimidation.

*"Leadership with impact is about daring to be decisive and vulnerable at the same time. Collaboration is inextricably linked to this."*

Assess the results of your initiative with everyone involved. Did you meet your objectives? Does your approach require tweaking? Can you halt certain actions and continue others? Evaluate your strategy to make your decision sustainable. Major changes typically trigger stressful thoughts and emotions – particularly your own. Staying aware of your internal processes can help guide your approach.

### **Small blade: Prevent little problems from growing.**

Use this option for less pressing matters that nevertheless require attention. Always act before a minor problem becomes a major complication. Sound leaders recognize that sometimes less radical action can prove sufficient. Acting prematurely or too forcefully can cause permanent damage. The small blade requires a specific point of action. Identify your problem and do the minimum required to fix it – no more or less. Don't let those who believe the small blade is insufficient dissuade you. Leadership often means balancing doing more than necessary versus not enough.

*"Leaders guard the future, but in the meantime, it is important to keep an eye on the road that leads to it."*

When author Gabriel Anthonio served as the director of a juvenile detention center, he once got a call about a distraught visitor at the front gate. A woman had brought a treat – pickled herring – for her son, but the centre prohibited glass containers. The guards would not admit her. Realising that he couldn't suddenly change the rules, Anthonio brought the woman to his office to discuss the problem. A trainee proposed repacking the fish using plastic kitchen trays. Roughly 30 minutes later, the woman cleared security. Afterward, security managers reassessed their guidelines and became more lenient, satisfying both visitors and staff. Aware leaders treat everyone with respect. They recognise individual uniqueness and never humiliate anyone. Your actions have greater impact when you regard yourself as a fellow human being instead of as a title or a role.

### **Corkscrew: Root out destructive negativity.**

Sometimes you need to dig a little deeper to uncover a problem such as negativity, which drains energy, threatens security, jeopardises relationships, and stifles growth and development. Effective leaders use the corkscrew to create an opening and relieve pent-up pressure and frustration. For example, you may have a team that's struggling with collaboration. A strained atmosphere, subpar performances and excessive gossip may indicate a general malaise no one is willing to discuss. People prove reluctant to talk about what's troubling them or to criticise others. Timing is everything. Handle sensitive topics outside the workplace. Discussing uncomfortable matters is difficult. Don't bring up everything at once. Let the flow of the conversation direct you.

*"Leadership focuses not only on thoughts or emotions spoken out loud, but also on those underneath the surface."*

Author Gabriël Anthonio used his corkscrew to investigate a problem at a youth care facility he managed. He discovered that an extramarital relationship between the supervisor and an employee was causing staff dysfunction in a residential ward. Tensions worsened when the two people scheduled holidays together. While keeping his feelings to himself, Anthonio said the team needed a professional coach. He relieved the pressure when he gave voice to the underlying problem. The centre reprimanded the two employees and transferred them out of the department.

### **Scissors: Restore balance and productivity.**

Whatever you cut with scissors cannot be put together again, so be careful. Using this tool properly allows you to move things around strategically and achieve your objectives. Employees often complain about unbalanced workloads and responsibilities. This may affect how people work together, and it could create tension. Some employees may resist change, yet periodic restructuring – or acting quickly when you sense unhappy rumblings – can benefit your teams and individual staff members.

*“Leadership knows how to stimulate people but makes sure not to cause overheated competition.”*

Some employees prefer a heavy workload; others do not. Invite employee participation and discussion. Normally, everyone agrees on a fair distribution of responsibilities, but if not, don't start cutting. Everyone must understand and accept the basic tenets of labour division. Organizations dictate needs, and leaders form productive, balanced teams, while reassigning workers who don't meet expectations. Take your employees' personal interests into account when dividing work. Some may want to expand their skills in certain areas; others may not like specific tasks. Family situations also play a role. Work around personal preferences and circumstances so you position your employees to develop and succeed.

**Can opener: Take off the lid and share your stories.**

Leaders who offer their employees a diet rich in personal stories motivate and inspire their workforce. If you tell effective stories, you will enable your employees to relate to your experiences, thus creating common ground. Leaders usually have personal goals, such as establishing a collaborative culture or offering attractive products and services. Employees may not find those goals exciting. Your stories can be an invaluable aid in motivating and directing your workforce.

*“Invite others to tell their stories too. You'll get to know each other better and this will improve collaboration.”*

People like hearing stories of success and struggle. Write about your most memorable life experiences – professional and personal – and share them. Self-examination requires a vulnerability that may pry open your insecurities, but that adds to your authenticity and strengthens your impact. Use your can opener judiciously. People tire of the same messages. Storytelling should be instructive, not egocentric. Encourage others to share their experiences, as well.

**Punch: Make sure everyone heads in the same direction.**

The punch creates a notch in a piece of wood, making it easier to insert a screw. In business, the punch indicates an entry point for your initiatives. Good leaders provide direction as well as inspiration. Use this tool to sharpen your focus and determine what direction to take.

*“Make sure your personal goals remain connected to those of the organization. If they go too far apart, the joint focus disappears and collaboration will become increasingly difficult.”*

Creating an action plan at the start of the year or for special projects requires specific directives. Consider simplifying the document with succinct bullet points that summarise the company's or project's goals. Your job as a leader is to determine which goals

work and what needs to happen next. Use the punch tool to clarify your situation. Leaders must know where they want to go and how to get there.

**Hook: Don't lose your footing at work.**

After a walk, the author's grandfather used the hook on his Swiss Army knife to scrape caked-on mud and dirt off the bottom of his hiking shoes. People normally don't have to think about walking and moving forward. When you're climbing, not stopping regularly to check the grip on your shoes – even if it feels awkward to pause briefly – means you could slide or stumble. Some leaders never look at their soles. They are too busy slaving away, believing that hard work sets a good example. But employees feel an obligation to work during off-hours if their bosses do. This can harm your health and theirs and damage employee-manager relationships.

*"Your walking boots – the way you act – are seen and evaluated by those in your environment each and every day."*

Many leaders never stop moving. They run into people in the hallway and immediately start discussing business. You can't use the hook correctly unless you're willing to stop, sit down and determine what's blocking your effectiveness. Is your calendar overflowing? Clean your shoes.

**Bottle opener: Celebrate special moments and rituals.**

When the author turned 18, his grandfather pried open a beer and offered it to him. Good leaders understand the impact of rituals and traditions. Recognising employees publicly validates their hard work and accomplishments. Rituals demonstrate appreciation, enhance relationships and make work more meaningful. Bottle openers aren't only for noteworthy moments; why not celebrate the completion of the workweek?

*"Good leaders are thoughtful. Does this not come naturally to you? All the more reason to pay attention to it."*

Don't use this implement impulsively. Plan for the moment. Know what you're going to say. Leaders have wasted opportunities for bonding by not using the right vocabulary in carrying out a ritual, such as presenting an employee with flowers. Honour the rituals that people value, and don't cut corners economically. For example, suddenly discontinuing Christmas bonuses or failing to acknowledge birthdays and employment anniversaries can cause emotional damage. Rituals build good will.

**Tweezers: Remove what doesn't work for you.**

Use the tweezers to remove hindrances to your performance. Reassess your to-do list. Remove items that are no longer a priority or reschedule meetings that interfere with

important projects. Delegate assignments that no longer interest you. Eliminate anything that prevents you from focusing on your priorities.

*“By regularly removing items that cause energy loss and irritation, you keep a clean and focused schedule.”*

Consider your schedule for the upcoming month. Highlight in yellow the items that energise you and benefit your bottom line. Highlight in orange things you’re not sure about. Use red to denote what’s bothersome or no longer applicable. Removing everything underlined in red and orange will free you up and increase your happiness.

### **Toothpick: Poke around inside.**

You can’t get through life without emotional pain. Ignoring problems won’t make them disappear. Divorce, death, critical bosses and rejection leave scars and create aggravation that can surface as anger or fear. Leaders can’t afford to be angry or abusive. The toothpick enables you to poke around inside and remove obstacles no one else can see. Effective leaders search within for sources of destructive behaviour.

*“Saying that you just have a short fuse, or blaming the past is not good enough for a leader. You better take out the toothpick.”*

You wouldn’t sit at a table with others and use a toothpick. So resist the temptation to share your troubles. Self-examination is a private matter. Therapy or coaching can be beneficial if your burdens prove too great to handle.

### **About the Author**

**Gabriël Anthonio**, chairman of the board of North Netherlands Addiction Care, lectures at the NHL-Stenden College and the University of Groningen.