Leadership Insights Gathered from 100 Lunches with 100 Healthcare Executives in Japan



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OPENING STATEMENT

Leadership is far less about authority — and far more about people.

When the reflections of 100 leaders are brought together, something becomes clear. Despite the differences in role, temperament and title, a common message emerges.

Across the following **12 lessons**, that message unfolds through their own words, experiences and perspectives.

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Introduction

The Idea Behind the Lunch Series

The catalyst for the **#50Lunches50Leaders** series came during the global COVID-19 pandemic. In a matter of weeks, digital communication tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Skype became fixtures of everyday professional life. Meetings that once took place behind boardroom doors suddenly occurred in living rooms and kitchens.

This unexpected shift revealed something important: the human side of leadership.



Colleagues could see leaders not only as executives but also as people. A company president might appear on screen with a dog sitting comfortably on their lap. A director might have children playing in the background. A manager's shelves might reveal sports trophies or personal hobbies.

These glimpses made leadership feel more relatable and more human. In Japan, leadership has often been perceived as hierarchical and distant. For junior employees, imagining a personal connection with senior executives can feel difficult. Yet the pandemic quietly dismantled some of those barriers.

The goal of the **#50Lunches50Leaders** series was to capture that more personal dimension of leadership through informal conversations. These lunches were intentionally casual and open, allowing leaders to share not only professional achievements but also the experiences and philosophies that shaped them.

Engaging with leaders across the healthcare industry proved deeply rewarding. Each conversation offered a different perspective on leadership, careers, and decision-making.

When analyzed collectively, the reflections from these 100 leaders reveal something powerful: leadership is far less about authority and far more about people.

Daniel McGrath
Co-founder & Managing Partner

How the Leadership Insights Were Analyzed

This e-book is based on a series of conversations with 100 senior leaders across the healthcare industry over a 2-year period. Each conversation was conducted as part of the **#50Lunches50Leaders** initiative, a series of informal discussions designed to capture the personal side of leadership.

Rather than formal interviews, the conversations were intentionally relaxed and conversational.

This approach encouraged leaders to speak candidly about their experiences, career paths, and leadership philosophies.

Once the full set of conversations was completed, the insights were analyzed collectively to identify patterns and recurring ideas.

The analysis focused on several key dimensions:



01 Leadership themes

Statements and reflections were categorized into leadership concepts such as empowerment, authenticity, talent development, and psychological safety.

02 Leadership traits

Behaviors and personal qualities frequently mentioned by leaders were grouped into common traits such as empathy, humility, curiosity, and resilience.

03 Career patterns

Leaders' professional journeys were examined to identify common paths toward senior leadership positions.

04 Leadership habits

Specific behaviors or routines that leaders credited for their success were documented and compared.

By examining these conversations collectively, clear patterns emerged. While each leader had a unique story, the analysis revealed a remarkable consistency in how successful leaders approach people, decision-making, and organizational culture.

The insights presented in this e-book represent the shared wisdom emerging from those 100 leadership conversations.

1

The Human Craft of Leadership

Historically framed around hierarchy and top-down directives, leadership, as told across these conversations, has become something quieter and more demanding: the practice of understanding, enabling and trusting people.





The Human Side of Leadership

01

A LEADER REFLECTS

“Leadership used to be viewed as very top-down and KPI driven...it has really transformed into a much stronger focus on the human element.”

Across the conversations, one theme emerged more consistently than any other: the shift toward human-centered leadership.

Historically, leadership was often framed around hierarchy, performance metrics, and top-down directives. While those elements remain important, the leaders in this series repeatedly emphasized that modern leadership depends heavily on understanding people.

Many leaders described their role not as directing others but as supporting and enabling them. Empathy, respect, and authenticity appeared frequently in the discussions. Leaders highlighted the importance of recognizing individual expertise, listening carefully to team members, and creating an environment where people feel comfortable contributing ideas.

This emphasis on the human element does not replace performance expectations. Rather, it strengthens them.

As one leader reflected:

“Leadership used to be viewed as very top-down and KPI driven... it has really transformed into a much stronger focus on the human element.”

This shift reflects a broader understanding that strong relationships and trust ultimately lead to stronger business results.

02

Empowerment and Autonomy

One of the most frequently mentioned leadership approaches was the concept of empowering teams through autonomy. Nearly half of the leaders emphasized a simple but powerful principle: set clear objectives and allow teams the freedom to achieve them.

Instead of micromanaging every detail, effective leaders focus on establishing direction and then stepping back to allow individuals to execute.

One leader summarized this philosophy succinctly:

"Hire the right people and put them in the right position, then half my job is done... basically get out of their way."

This philosophy requires trust. Leaders must believe in the capabilities of their teams and accept that different individuals may approach challenges in different ways.

Autonomy does not mean a lack of structure. Rather, it means providing clear goals and meaningful ownership. When people feel responsible for outcomes rather than merely following instructions, engagement and innovation often increase.



03

The Power of Listening

Listening emerged as another defining behavior among successful leaders.

Many described the importance of maintaining an open-door policy and regularly engaging in one-on-one conversations with team members. Listening helps leaders understand challenges, uncover opportunities, and build trust across organizations.

Several leaders explained that when entering a new role, they spend their first weeks meeting individually with employees at all levels.

This approach serves two purposes. First, it helps leaders learn about the organization from those closest to the work. Second, it signals that every voice matters.

However, listening must be balanced with decisiveness. As one leader observed, listening too much can sometimes prevent a leader from forming a clear direction.

Effective leadership therefore requires both openness to perspectives and confidence in decision-making.





04

Developing People and Careers

Another strong theme throughout the conversations was the importance of developing talent. Many leaders described mentorship as a central responsibility. Their role was not only to manage performance but also to help individuals grow professionally.

One metaphor frequently mentioned was that a career should resemble a “jungle gym” rather than a ladder. Traditional career ladders suggest a single upward path. In contrast, a jungle gym allows movement in multiple directions, encouraging individuals to explore different functions and experiences.

Leaders emphasized that diverse experiences often produce more capable executives. Moving across departments, industries, or geographies can broaden perspective and strengthen leadership capabilities.

Several leaders also noted that training one’s replacement should be considered part of the job. By developing others, leaders ensure the organization continues to thrive long after their own tenure.

05

Adaptability and Situational Leadership

The leaders in this series frequently highlighted the need for adaptability. Different situations require different leadership approaches. Leading a start-up organization requires different behaviors than managing a mature multinational corporation.

In fast-growing environments, leaders may need to prioritize speed and experimentation. In established organizations, consistency and process may become more important.

Situational leadership therefore involves adjusting management styles depending on the maturity of the organization, the complexity of the project, and the experience of the team. Leaders who recognize these differences are better positioned to guide organizations through change.

06

Psychological Safety and Innovation

Innovation rarely emerges in environments where people fear failure. For this reason, many leaders emphasized the importance of creating psychological safety.

Psychological safety refers to an environment where individuals feel comfortable expressing ideas, asking questions, and admitting mistakes without fear of punishment.

Several leaders explained that mistakes should be viewed as learning opportunities rather than failures. This perspective encourages experimentation and continuous improvement. When employees know that thoughtful risk-taking is acceptable, they are more likely to propose bold ideas.

In industries like healthcare, where innovation can directly impact patients, cultivating this environment becomes especially important.



07

Leadership Across Global and Local Cultures





Many leaders in the series had extensive international experience. Their careers often included time spent working at global headquarters or regional hubs before returning to lead organizations locally.

These experiences highlighted the importance of balancing global strategy with local understanding. Japan's business environment presents unique cultural and regulatory considerations. Leaders must therefore translate global expectations into locally effective strategies.

Successful leaders often act as bridges between global and local perspectives, ensuring that both sides understand each other's priorities.

2

Paths, Habits and Contrarian Wisdom



Beneath a hundred different biographies lie a handful of shared shapes — recurring archetypes, common routes to the top, defining daily habits, and a few convictions that cut against received wisdom.

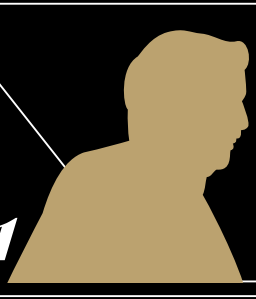
08

Leadership Archetypes:

Five Paths to Leading

The conversations revealed several recurring archetypes. Together they show that effective leadership takes many shapes — no single temperament holds a monopoly on it.

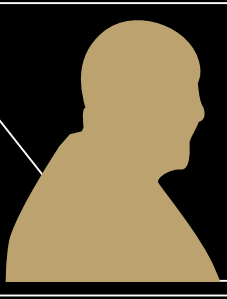
01



The Builder

Builders are motivated by creating new organizations and scaling operations. They thrive in entrepreneurial environments and enjoy turning ideas into functioning businesses.

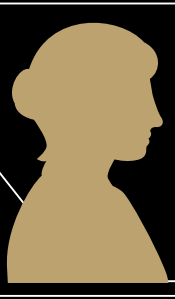
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The Mentor

Mentors prioritize developing people. They take pride in seeing former team members succeed and believe that talent is the most valuable asset in any organization.

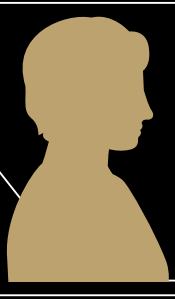
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The Operator

Operators focus on execution. They emphasize clear objectives, measurable outcomes, and disciplined management of performance metrics.

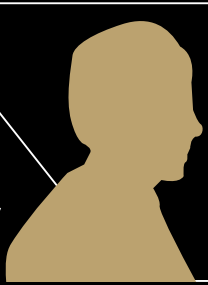
04



The Explorer

Explorers pursue diverse experiences across industries and geographies. Their curiosity drives them to seek new perspectives and opportunities.

05



The Challenger

Challengers encourage debate and critical thinking. They value disagreement as a way to uncover better solutions.

Leadership Career Journeys

09

Analysis of the leaders' backgrounds revealed several recurring career patterns. Each story was distinct, yet the routes toward senior leadership rhymed in familiar ways.



Crossing industries

Many built their careers by moving between sectors, bringing fresh perspective to each new field.



The jungle gym move

Others transitioned across functions to broaden their understanding of how a business truly operates.



International experience

Several spent years in global headquarters or regional offices before returning to lead.



Calculated risk

Many left stable positions to join early-stage companies — decisions that often accelerated their growth.

10

Habits That Define Great Leaders

Despite differences in background and personality, the leaders shared several common habits.

Active listening was one of the most frequently mentioned behaviors. Leaders emphasized the importance of understanding perspectives from across the organization.

Regular feedback was also considered essential. As one leader put it:

“Feedback is the champions’ breakfast.”

Many leaders also stressed the importance of staying connected to the realities of the business by visiting manufacturing sites or joining sales teams in the field.

Finally, continuous learning played a significant role. Some leaders pursued advanced degrees mid-career, while others sought new knowledge through diverse professional experiences.



11

Contrarian Leadership Insights

A Against perfection

Beware the pursuit of perfection

In fast-moving industries, waiting for perfect information delays progress. Leaders often prefer timely decisions, adjusting course as they learn.

B For disagreement

Welcome healthy disagreement

Debate keeps organisations from becoming stagnant and surfaces better solutions. Effective leadership often means questioning established norms.

The best leaders treat certainty with suspicion — and progress as something to be corrected toward, not waited for.



Final Lessons from 100 Leaders

12

Across every conversation, a handful of lessons surfaced with remarkable consistency.



01

Support people first

Technical expertise alone is insufficient; success depends on relationships and trust.

02

Define a clear purpose

Connecting daily work to a broader mission keeps teams aligned through difficulty.

03

Make space to experiment

Room for thoughtful risk-taking is where innovation is allowed to begin.

04

Be a connector

See yourself as the one who brings talented people together — not the most knowledgeable in the room.

05

Embrace the winding path

Career success rarely runs in a straight line; diverse experience produces the most effective leaders.

Conclusion

Leadership as a Human Practice

The 100 conversations in this series demonstrate that leadership is not defined solely by authority or organizational charts. Instead, leadership emerges through relationships, decisions, and the ability to inspire others toward a shared purpose.

While industries and technologies continue to evolve, the core principles of leadership remain grounded in human connection.

Empathy, curiosity, resilience, and authenticity appeared again and again in the reflections of these leaders.

Ultimately, the lessons from these conversations suggest that leadership is less about commanding and more about creating environments where people can succeed together.





















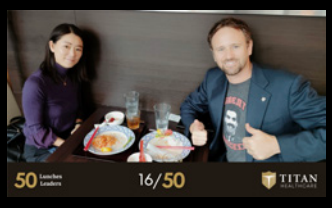




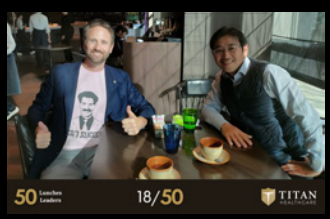








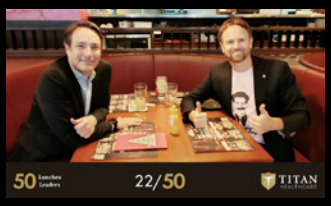


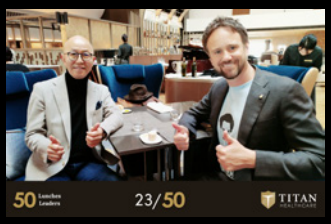


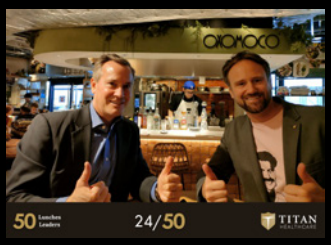














The Lunches
1-25







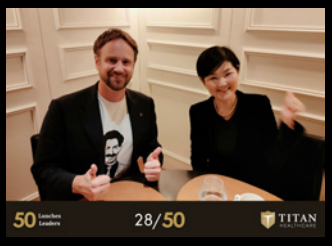


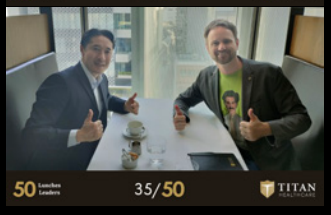










































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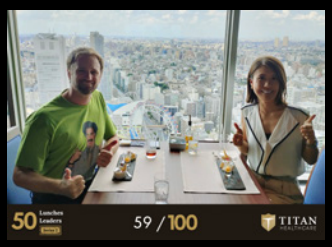


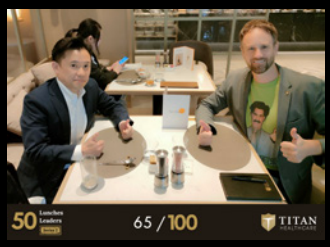






















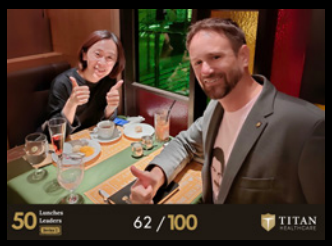






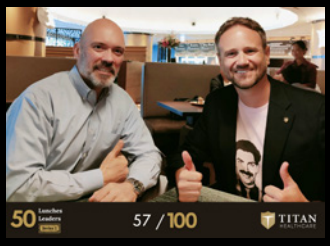














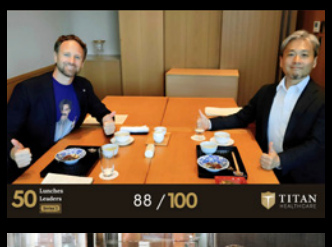




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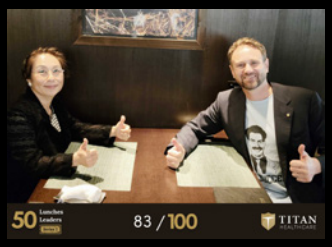


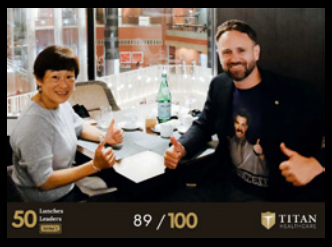


































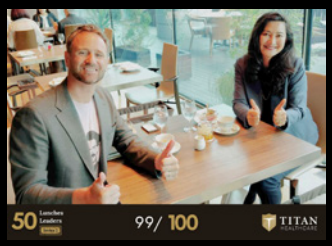














The Lunches 76-100

Acknowledgments

Gratitude to the Leaders Behind the Conversations

This book would not exist without the generosity of the leaders who participated in the **#50Lunches50Leaders** series.

Each of the one hundred conversations represented far more than a professional exchange. They were moments of openness in which experienced executives shared personal reflections on leadership, career decisions, and the lessons they learned along the way.

Despite demanding schedules and significant responsibilities, these leaders took the time to engage in informal discussions about topics that are rarely captured in formal interviews: uncertainty, mistakes, curiosity, and the human side of leadership.

Their willingness to speak candidly made it possible to uncover patterns that might otherwise remain hidden. While each leader has a unique background and perspective, together their stories reveal a consistent message: leadership is ultimately about people.

These conversations also demonstrate the power of dialogue. When leaders share their experiences openly, they create opportunities for others to learn, reflect, and grow. To all the leaders who participated in these lunches, thank you for your time, your insights, and your honesty. Your perspectives form the foundation of this book and the leadership lessons it contains.

Finally, appreciation goes to the broader community of professionals who continue to contribute to discussions about leadership, mentorship, and the future of the healthcare industry. The spirit of curiosity and collaboration that shaped these conversations continues to inspire the next generation of leaders.

Thank you!

Whether you're a decision-maker, hiring manager,
HR leader, an established company in Japan,
or a business considering entering the Japanese market,
I'm always happy to have a conversation.

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