"If you want to be taken seriously as a thought leader, *read this book*."
Mel Robbins, *New York Times* bestselling author; host of *The Mel Robbins Podcast*

The THOUGHT LEADERSHIP HANDBOOK

How the Experts Elevate Their Big Ideas—and How You Can Too

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Foreword by Lisa Bodell

Proven tools to:

- Hone your craft
- Engage the right people
- Create lasting impact

Chapter 12

The Duty to Speak

The Transformation

Chester Elton approached Marshall Goldsmith with a request: Would he write a blurb for his next book?

"I'd be less than happy to," Marshall joked. Chester prepared for disappointment, but Marshall quickly continued. "I'll do you one better. You want me to write the foreword?"

What Marshall said next reframed Chester's entire view of thought leadership: "You know, Chester, there's two ways to view the world when you do what you and I do. One is that everybody in the room is a competitor. The other view is, what can I do to help everybody in the room? So we have a tide that raises all ships."

Chester Elton had spent decades at O.C. Tanner, the employee recognition company, as their "Apostle of Appreciation"; this fantastic job title meant he was the in-house expert who taught organizations how to reward performance. Their platform identity? "The Carrot Principle." Extrinsic rewards. Measurable motivation. He knew the frameworks. He'd helped build them.

Then he and his coauthor, Adrian Gostick, left to build their own company: The Culture Works. They became Practice Owners and continued to spread the idea through speeches and consulting. They were Thought Leaders on the Run, carrying their recognition message from stage to stage. Chester had

made the transition many thought leaders make—from teaching as part of his corporate job to building an independent practice around his expertise. He was successful, and he was also competing fiercely with everyone else in that space.

And now Marshall Goldsmith had offered to write the foreword. Not just a blurb. The foreword.

Why?

"I'm up the ladder," Marshall explained. "I say yes to pretty much everything, and, Chester, you should too."

Chester remembers: "The more I talked to Marshall, the more I thought, *You know, that's just silly*." The competition mindset was silly. The hoarding was silly. The zero-sum thinking was silly.

Chester didn't just internalize this lesson; he lived it. Years later, when we launched our *Leveraging Thought Leadership* podcast, we needed initial guests willing to help us work out the process and lend their credibility. Chester agreed to be a guest, and he didn't just agree. He insisted on being our very first guest, helping lift our new project exactly as Marshall had lifted him. The generosity had come full circle.

So why doesn't our entire field operate this way? To answer honestly requires starting with our own failures. What follows is both confession and manifesto, acknowledging where we've personally fallen short while also passionately arguing why this field matters and why it must also change.

Our Own Reckoning

We, Peter Winick and Bill Sherman, have each spent twenty years as consultants in the thought leadership industry. We occupied an unusual position. We've consulted with hundreds of thought leaders, from emerging voices to Fortune 50 CEOs, Nobel Prize nominees, endowed chairs at world-class business schools. We've stood in their intellectual attics and seen their half-formed frameworks. We've witnessed their private struggles with imposter syndrome and exhaustion. We've identified patterns, because we've stood at a vantage

point that few others get to see.

We work as consultants. This is how we sustain our practice. This book contains the insights we learned in our journey alongside thought leaders. And we can work with you directly, if you choose. As Stephen M. R. Covey explained when discussing Franklin Covey's approach, "No margin, no mission." Without sustainable business models, we can't pursue our purpose of advancing the field.

And yet.

We played it safe. We said we would never write a book because we didn't want to compete with the authors we served. We kept our deepest insights behind consulting fees. Bill speaks:

> For twenty years, I helped clients speak their imperfect truths. I was their psychopomp—the guide who knows the way but never enters. Many days, I spoke on our clients' behalf as their salesperson for corporate buyers. And on one disastrous evening twenty years ago, I spoke on a keynoter's behalf in a conference room above Times Square. I replaced my client's stories with my own. I made myself as vulnerable as I could to the audience, and still it wasn't enough. I learned a lesson: Avoid the stage and the spotlight. That place was for others, not me.
>
> And so, for the past twenty years, I've sold my consulting skills and ideas but avoided writing a free manifesto or a thirty-dollar book. I locked many of my own core ideas behind the consulting fee paywall. I watched people who couldn't afford our fees struggle. "It's just business," I told myself. But it's not just business. It's also lives and purpose. And the evidence surrounded me daily.
>
> When I walked into my office, I was surrounded by books written by clients and friends rather than strangers. I was proud to have walked alongside so many authors and helped them codify their core ideas, generate revenue, and create impact.
>
> Sometimes my clients would ask, "Why haven't you written a book, Bill?" I deflected with practiced excuses. Behind-the-scenes

> advisor. Small market. Not worthy. But those were lies I told myself. I was afraid. What if my book was met with sharp-worded Amazon reviews? What if the ideas were laughed at? Or worse. Ignored.
>
> Our field needs a shared language. This book contains my best. I'm not holding back anymore. You must judge if it's helpful to you.
>
> To write this book, I stole evenings and weekends from those I love most. My spouse half jokingly compared my book writing to an affair. My parents, both in their mid-eighties, asked each night at the dinner table, "How did the writing go today?" I reported the progress dutifully. My family will never get back the lost time with me. Yet, they cheered me on. I wish I could have written a simpler book with weaker arguments. My wife laughed and affectionately said, "No you couldn't. That's not you." And she's right.
>
> Now, when I enter my office, I no longer see neat rows of books written by friends and clients. I see years of their lives. The lessons they learned and the vulnerability they've chosen.
>
> In writing this book, I found what I must speak. I can no longer stay silent.

We three authors—Bill, Peter, and Naren—are not neutral observers. We profit from the very industry we're critiquing. Our silence created a gap in the conversation, and our complicity helped maintain it.

Our study of thought leadership emerges from the Western tradition and North American business contexts. Other cultures define and transmit knowledge very differently. They are not our stories to tell. Nor should we try to do so. Instead of making a universal argument, we focus on what North American thought leadership has been and what we believe it must become.

Both/And

Daniel Drezner's *The Ideas Industry* maps a fundamental shift in how ideas circulate in the twenty-first century. He distinguishes between "public

intellectuals"—critics who complicate, question, and often work in academia—and "thought leaders"—optimists who simplify, inspire, and often emerge from business. He describes thought leaders as "intellectual evangelists who know one big thing and believe that their important idea will change the world."

Drezner argues that "the modern marketplace of ideas benefits all intellectuals, but it benefits thought leaders far more than others." Economic forces, technological disruption, and wealth inequality have tilted the marketplace of ideas toward thought leaders and away from public intellectuals.

His analysis stings because it's largely accurate. The market prefers people who validate their worldviews. The TED stage rewards simplicity over complexity. Many who call themselves thought leaders are indeed motivational speakers with little substance. We've seen the oversimplifiers and self-promoters that Drezner describes. On this diagnosis, we agree.

But Drezner's framework creates a binary that misses what we've observed in our own practice. The best thought leaders aren't failed public intellectuals or anti-intellectual simplifiers. They're practitioners who've recognized patterns through experience and made an extraordinary choice: to share those patterns despite their imperfection. They occupy what philosophers call the metamodern position: sincerely committed while acknowledging complexity, embodying contradictions while speaking earnestly.

This is the both/and that defines our moment. We run businesses that need revenue, *and* we have obligations to share knowledge. We possess imperfect understanding, *and* others need what we've learned. We risk oversimplification, *and* silence guarantees worse outcomes.

Drezner's critique helps us stay conscious of these tensions. But consciousness of contradiction doesn't require choosing sides in his binary.

Three Layers of Truth

To understand why speaking imperfectly might be ethical, we need to examine what kind of truth we're actually discussing.

Big-*T* truth belongs to philosophers and prophets wrestling with questions

like "What is justice?" or "Why does anything exist?" These aren't questions you answer in a quarterly business review. Big-*T* truth isn't our domain, and it's not the domain of anyone in business.

Lies and deception form the bottom layer. Bernie Madoff didn't offer flawed investment strategies; he ran a Ponzi scheme. Elizabeth Holmes didn't share imperfect knowledge about blood testing; she fabricated capabilities that didn't exist. These aren't incomplete truths or thought leadership. They're deliberate falsifications designed to extract value while providing none.

Imperfect truths occupy the crucial middle layer. After studying how ideas create impact, we've recognized patterns. When any of us practice thought leadership, we've not seen an ultimate truth. Our ideas are not complete. But they're more useful than our silence.

Every framework simplifies reality—that's what makes it portable. Every model reduces complexity—that's what makes it teachable. And that's the hard, necessary work of our field of thought leadership.

Changing the Rules

In Plato's *Republic*, a prisoner gets dragged from the cave into blinding daylight to perceive ultimate reality. Plato carefully constructed his allegory of the cave with the precision of a jailer. Wall-facing prisoners watch shadows cast by people who carry objects past the fire. Plato identifies two types of object carriers: some speak, while others are silent.

Plato's prisoners are waiting for a hero, perhaps a philosopher king, to drag them out into the daylight of big-*T* truth. For most of them, the cave and the wall are all they will ever know.

Elinor Ostrom received the Nobel Prize in economics for her work on managing the commons. In *Governing the Commons*, she rejected frameworks—such as the prisoner's dilemma—that require individuals to be "incapable of changing their constraints." She writes, "I would rather address the question of how to enhance the capabilities of those involved to change the constraining rules of the game to lead to outcomes rather than remorseless tragedies."

So, let's follow her lead and change the rules of Plato's game.

We can smash the prisoners' shackles. Here comes everybody—no longer prisoners watching shadows but everyone a potential carrier with agency. This democratization brings both promise and peril. And it's not hypothetical. Our world's knowledge gatekeepers have been weakened. Everyone can potentially speak, and they can leverage AI-generated content and algorithmic amplification.

When we expand agency to everyone, we transform the cave into something else entirely, a commons where everyone's choices affect the shared resource. What do you put into the commons, and what do you take out? In the world of tangible commons, fish can be taken out of fisheries. Water can be removed from reservoirs. Elinor Ostrom started studying the commons in the 1960s. For most of her career, she studied tangible things. How did communities in the Los Angeles watershed overcome perennial shortages and constant overdrilling? How had Nepali farmers successfully created and sustained a self-governing system?

Then, in the early 2000s, Ostrom turned her attention to the knowledge commons. The knowledge commons reflects what ideas we add to it and what economic value we extract from it. Just like a fishery or a water reservoir, it can be overdrawn or polluted. She differentiated between the physical book that can be copyrighted and sold and the ideas themselves that have their own ways of spreading.

Ostrom and her coeditor, Charlotte Hess, argue in the introduction to *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons* that any commons, knowledge or tangible, must be preserved and protected. "A commons is not value-laden—its outcome can be good or bad, sustainable or not."

All of us benefit from the generations of insights others have added to the knowledge commons. Some of us then choose to add knowledge through scholarship or thought leadership.

So, let's look at the options in this allegory of the cave where there are no prisoners, simply cave dwellers, all of whom can speak and contribute to the knowledge commons:

1. We can remain wall facers, concealing our knowledge while others walk the ramp and cast shadows.
2. We can walk past the fire quietly, our actions casting shadows but offering no context—leaving observers to wonder, *How do they do that so well?*
3. Or we can both walk past the fire and speak. We become students and teachers. We explain what we know through models, frameworks, and teaching.

The first two options represent a choice to let the commons degrade.

Only the third choice to speak up and share our little-*t* truths nurtures the knowledge commons.

A core idea can simultaneously exist within a free online video, a thirty-dollar book, and a high-ticket keynote or consulting project. This both/and duality is not a design flaw. It's a critical necessity for the exchange of ideas and value. You can give a keynote, and the members of your audience can repeat your top three insights to their colleagues in a meeting the next day.

You cannot set up a tollbooth that will collect money every time someone repeats one of the core ideas you advocate. Ideas need both your personal energy *and* external effort to travel. When core ideas have sufficient velocity, they can generate new engagements and more revenue.

If you want to be paid for your work, you cannot fully gatekeep the ideas. You have to speak and put your ideas into the commons. And to reach scale, your ideas must be able to travel without you. The more your ideas travel for free, the more in demand you and your work will be.

The Duty to Speak

In the twenty-first century, the knowledge commons is at great risk. Social media influencers claim expertise. They post and post. AI-created slop fills every platform. Algorithms amplify bad ideas. Traditional gatekeepers have been bypassed. Misinformation spreads worldwide in moments. The noise

and echo grow louder. Each year it becomes harder to distinguish real from fabricated. Harder to spot helpful little-*t* truths amid intentional deceit.

Our cave is a noisy place. When people with expertise choose silence, that space doesn't become contemplative. It becomes occupied by whoever speaks loudest, promises the most, and deceives the best.

We've watched this pattern repeatedly. When serious practitioners avoid thought leadership because the term embarrasses them, extractors and deceivers claim it gladly. When experts hesitate over imperfection, confidence artists fill the gap with dangerous certainty. When knowledge holders stay silent, the conversation continues without them—degraded, distorted, but decisive in shaping understanding.

When we practice thought leadership, we inherit a duty to speak. This duty isn't imposed externally. We acknowledge the value we received from the past generations of thinkers whose work enabled our learning. We add ideas to today's community while we also extract value. And we pay it forward to the next generation of people who will advocate their own ideas.

You Have No Right to an Audience

But wait. Doesn't declaring a "duty to speak" create its own tyranny? Who gets to simply experience rather than explain?

Your duty to speak creates absolutely no duty for others to listen. They can ignore you, walk out, or even vocally disagree.

This is the ethical safety valve: You must earn an audience or have none at all. Every member of the audience makes an ongoing choice for themselves: "Shall I continue to listen? Or will I tune this person out?"

Waldo Waldman lost half the keynote audience to the smell of coffee and fresh beignets and the impulse to check their emails and network. And yet, after he was introduced, he spoke with passion and purpose to those people who stayed to listen.

Walt Whitman portrays the audience member's agency perfectly in his poem "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." The poem's narrator sits

through a notable scientist's astronomy lecture filled with proofs, figures, charts, and diagrams. Then . . .

> *How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,*
> *Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,*
> *In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,*
> *Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*

Whitman's listener simply walks out of the lecture. No confrontation. No explanation. They prefer direct experience to mediated knowledge. They choose stars over star charts.

This isn't failure but freedom—yours and theirs. You're freed from needing universal relevance. They're freed from unwanted instruction. The duty to speak is matched by everyone else's right to walk out. You're not forcing enlightenment. You're making patterns available for those who find them useful, when they find them useful, in forms they can actually use.

We won't reach our audiences by shouting louder. The cave is already a raucous place filled with echoes. Instead, our world needs more skilled voices in thought leadership, those who have not just studied their expertise but who also study how thought leadership works. We need to get better at thought leadership as individuals and as a community. And that means we need better tools.

Becoming Better Stewards

Thought leaders work in a knowledge commons. It's where we add value through our ideas. And it's also how we earn a living. And yet, we have often been lumped with deceivers, frauds, and snake oil sellers—those people who extract far more value from their audience than they provide.

Practitioners of thought leadership have been poor stewards of the knowledge commons. We must do far better for ourselves and for the knowledge commons and communities we serve.

We routinely see amazing, life-changing business ideas locked in digital

files or revealed in one-on-one conversations. Too many fail to reach their intended audience because the thought leader hasn't developed a viable strategy or committed to executing it.

This pattern convinced us that thought leadership needs shared language and tools. Not to create orthodoxy but to enable conversation about the practice itself.

Imagine if every accountant used their own personal definitions. That's exactly the chaos in thought leadership today. We have expertise in our individual areas, but we lack a common language to talk about thought leadership. When thought leaders come together and talk, we often talk past each other without shared understanding.

It's time to stop acting like a medieval guild, where we protect our personal tools and methods through secrecy. A common language and tool set will improve our work, create more value for audiences, and make it easier to pass on our hard-earned skills to the next generation.

Over the years, as we worked with thought leaders, we asked ourselves the following questions, and these are the answers we found:

What Makes Good Thought Leadership?

The Four Elements describe the essential components every practitioner needs.

How Do Ideas Create Impact?

The Impact Equation explains why some good ideas spread while others languish. It also explains why some weak ideas have more impact than fantastic ideas.

Why Do People Practice Thought Leadership?

The Five Avatars examine *why* people practice thought leadership instead of *how* they communicate ideas.

This book includes our frameworks, language, and tools we use ourselves. We found them essential to do our work and to serve our clients. If you have other ideas, please join the conversation.

The Challenge and Call

To established thought leadership practitioners: You've accepted the responsibility by speaking. Yes, you profit from your knowledge. Yes, sharing could reduce your competitive advantage, *and* hoarding insights while others struggle with preventable problems creates worse outcomes. Create rising tides despite the contradictions. Your generosity despite competition models the metamodern way. The knowledge commons that enabled your success needs your continued contribution.

To silent knowledge holders: What have you recognized that others need to see? Your imposter syndrome, while real, matters less than your absence in the public square. Your fear of oversimplification is understandable, but we invite you to join us. Your concern about distortion is valid, but there's also a joy in making an impact.

To thought leadership skeptics, like Drezner: Your diagnosis of the twenty-first-century ideas industry is largely correct. Economic and social forces have largely benefited thought leaders more than public intellectuals. Thought leaders do oversimplify, seek market validation, and bypass peer review. The TED industrial complex you describe is real, *and*—this is the metamodern position—what's the alternative? Should practitioners with deep experience stay silent while academics publish paywalled journals? Should we wait for perfect knowledge while people navigate using whatever they find?

You're right that thought leaders aren't public intellectuals. We're not trying to be. We're practitioners sharing patterns we've

recognized, knowing they're incomplete, knowing we profit from sharing them, knowing we risk distortion. Your critiques keep us honest about these contradictions. There are thought leadership experts who worry as deeply about the degradation as you do. But if we fall silent, we abandon the field to those who extract without contributing.

The solution is conscious practice—acknowledging our limitations while speaking anyway.

To our community: We've kept too much behind paywalls for too long. Not from greed alone but from scarcity thinking—fear that sharing everything would eliminate our value. We were wrong, *and* we still need sustainable business models. Both truths coexist.

Can someone who could never afford your services still benefit meaningfully from your knowledge? What knowledge will you put into the commons for all? You can lift people up and make a good living. You can keep your premium intellectual property and equip your audience with basic language and tools they need to thrive. They will still come to you.

We, the three authors of this book, have made our choice, and we entered the square. Will you?

Eduardo's Choice

Eduardo Briceño faced darkness at 1:40 a.m. Power outage. BCG partners waiting. No infrastructure. No backup systems. Just knowledge they needed and darkness preventing transmission.

He didn't debate whether his Performance Paradox perfectly captured organizational dynamics. He knew it didn't.

He didn't worry whether car headlights provided optimal illumination. He knew they didn't. He understood both the insufficiency and necessity of his choice.

He set up the headlights and spoke.

This is the choice before us: Will we be perfect or useful?

C. G. Jung wrote that "as far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being."

Eduardo's headlights embodied this light literally—not perfect light, not permanent light, and not light everyone wanted, but useful light. That's the metamodern position: embracing both the inadequacy and necessity of our illumination.

Our study of thought leadership—including thousands of conversations and decades of observation—has taught us that the field needs conscious carriers who speak their little-*t* truths with skill. They've studied their corners long enough to recognize patterns; they accept that their message will be imperfect, and yet they constantly work to improve how they explain the idea to others. They actively study their field *and* the necessary work of thought leadership.

When we embrace an idea, it transforms us. We see the world differently. Our behaviors will change.

Conscious carriers who've been transformed by their ideas signal their trustworthiness. Not because they carry universal truth but because they've let ideas change them visibly, publicly, repeatedly.

They, like everyone, can be judged by their behaviors. But audiences can also judge conscious carriers by the ideas they speak and the tools they offer. Do they merely extract value from the knowledge commons? Or do they add real value that people appreciate and use?

Therefore, our choice isn't between perfect and imperfect speech. You will cast imperfect shadows through your actions *and* also add context. You can make a good living *and* also nurture the knowledge commons. You can honor your personal transformation *and* invite others to join you. We see three choices in a cave where everyone has agency and can speak if they choose. The wall facers remain silent. The silent carriers signal through their behaviors. The conscious carriers walk the difficult path and choose to speak.

Which role will you choose?