

DARE TO UN-LEAD

The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World

The Podcast



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Episode 1 – Myron Rogers

Change in the Workplace:
Living Organizations Thinker Myron Rogers



You just can't "fix" an organization. Orgs are living systems, not machines. So how do we change them? Systems thinker Myron Rogers, an author and advisor in large scale social change, explains how to best approach transformation work in today's organizations. You will learn about change principles that help improve corporate culture, quality, patient or customer care.

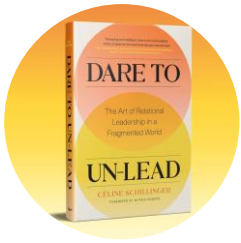
Podcast Transcript

Celine: It is tempting to think that more leadership or some kind of improved leadership will help us and our organizations work better. But what if leadership was part of the problem instead of the solution? What if our understanding of it only maintained principles of the past, which no longer serve as well?

That's what I explore in my book, *Dare to Un-Lead*, and today in this podcast. Join me and my guest, a person quoted in the book or in tune with its values, to learn from them what it takes to un-lead and succeed together.

Welcome to this first episode of The Dare to Un-Lead podcast. Over the course of 11 episodes with a guest, we're going to explore chapter by chapter, the major themes discussed in the book, but today is gonna be a little bit special. We're not going to dwell on chapter one "What got us here won't get us there".

Chapter one identifies the fundamental changes facing business and society, which explain why the recipes of the past no longer work on today's employees and citizens, but with my guest today, I



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want to talk more broadly about the general philosophy of the book and of the approach it describes because this approach owes a lot to him.

Myron Rogers is the man who wrote the Foreword of *Dare to Un-Lead*. He's also a pioneer in the application of living system theory to the profound challenges of today's organizations. He runs in the UK, where he now lives, a consulting practice in large scale strategic social change. He is a co-author with Meg Wheatley of the best seller *A Simpler Way*.

I'm very lucky to have a signed copy of *A Simpler Way*, which is a marvel of insights. My copy is highlighted and annotated the whole way through, and if we have time today, I will ask you, Myron, for comments on some excerpts, but only if we have time because I have plenty of questions to ask you. Myron has been a profound inspiration since I stumbled upon him on social media several years ago, and even more since we've worked together on a common project.

I can say he revolutionized the way I view change and he expanded my horizons, and therefore my possibilities, quite dramatically. I have seen firsthand the power of his ideas for human and organizational development. I would not be who I am today and I would not have thought in the way that led me to write *Dare to Un-Lead* if I had not met Myron.

Myron, I'm grateful for our lasting friendship and for your presence today. Welcome.

Myron: Oh my goodness, I'm overwhelmed. I mean, should we stop now?

Celine: That's only a fraction of what I mean when I think of Myron :)

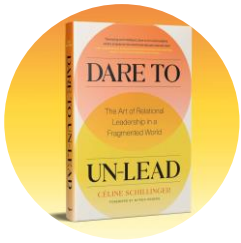
Myron: That's really humbling. And, the work that we did together actually changed me as well. This profound stuff is out there. So I'm sure we'll touch on that.

Celine: Myron, that's a great segway to my very first question. What is your art? Can you describe what you do? What's your art?

Myron: It's a funny thing. I have a couple of big clients now with which I realize, what I'm doing with them goes well below the surface of what it looks like I'm doing with them.

I think that I have a kind of gift for helping people see what's really going on. In spite of what they're saying about what's going on. So, and in that is a belief that if people can see what's really happening and how it is, they're co-creating what's really happening, it gives them freedom to choose a different path, right?

It gives us the ability to say: this is working for us. This is where we wanna go. This is the direction we wanna lead in. And that's showing up, right? Or it's showing up really poorly and what do we have to do together, to actually change that? So I think there's some sort of art of hosting the conversation that makes visible what's really quite invisible generally.



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Celine: That's quite a skill. And what led you to that?

Myron: Oh, well, I hate to admit this, but I just turned 70 years old, so I've been doing this work for more than 40 years. And, it was a confluence of things.

But I would go back to my high school experience. I went to an all male Jesuit prep school that was actually really steeped in kind of liberation theology at the time, and we got engaged very much in social change issues. And anyone who's listening to this from the United States would know that every major city in the United States has a Martin Luther King Boulevard, but it also has a Caesar Chavez Boulevard. And Chavez was the leader of the Latino Liberation Movement, I would say in the United Farm Workers on the West Coast. And in high school we became a part of that movement which was a boycott of grapes for a number of years.

My high school actually ran the grape boycott in Massachusetts, so I very early on, and there were many other things that went on in that school, but very early on was exposed to activism and social change and whatnot, and that has shown up in a, I guess somewhat disguised way in my work with organizations. But the intent is there. The intent is there.

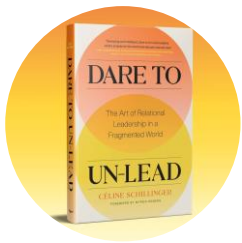
Celine: That's amazing. And what are the underlying principles of your work?

Myron: Well, there's a couple of ways of thinking about that. I mean, that I probably have three sets. One is just the general view that organizations are living systems, not machines. That would be the fundamental one, and underneath that is the dynamics. Understanding the dynamics of living systems allows you to see what's unfolding in any complex collection of people – more than an organization, systems, and all the many systems that are out there. It allows you to see how those dynamics are constantly creating the intended and unintended consequences that we live in every day, and that the dynamics of living systems persist through time and space.

So, you can either work with them, understand them, and try and work with them, or you can work against them. And if you work against them, you lose. It's just that the dynamics of life are much more powerful, wiser than we know.

And then, I don't know if you wanna go here, but at another level... With Meg Wheatley and Fritjof Capra and others, for a number of years, we ran multi-day seminars trying to teach people about living systems theory and its application to social systems change. One of the things that I came to believe is that if the living system's view of the world was at all correct, and the way we were thinking about it in social systems, then you should feel it in an embodied way. When the explanation about what's going on is happening, you should be able to say, oh, yeah, that actually explains my experience in a different way.

And so over time, I came up with these maxims as you know. And so that would be the other level of principles that I operate from.



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And with the maxims, the thing is that they very quickly resonate with people's experience and give them a different window or different understanding on why and how and what you would do to fix things that aren't going well, what you would do to design things. So they go well. So that's, I mean, that's the maxim's piece.

And the other piece about it is you don't need a three day lab on systems thinking to be able to understand how it manifests at this level and how easily you can use them.

Celine: Can you tell us about those maxims? Or, what are they? They're short sentences that bear your name.

Myron: The first one actually, I didn't exclusively create this. We think it was Kurt Lewin and Margaret Mead many years ago, and it is that "people own what they help create", full stop. I've never put that out there and found an argument against that. People immediately understand.

For me, it means not only do people own what they help create, but that whatever is *given* to any group of people, they will turn it back into themselves. Which is a living system principle as well. So if you don't invite the group affected by something into the creative process at some point along the way, so that their voice, their intelligence, their wisdom can be heard, you're going to get unintended consequences of the wrong kind.

Celine: How often do you think it happens in the corporate world to invite people affected by change into designing the change?

Myron: Not very...

Celine: You're being kind.

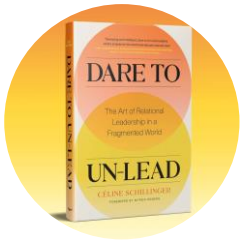
Myron: I'm doing a design lab for 40 or 50 people in one very big health and care organization in the UK and there's a lot of energy for that.

Now, I think, because of the complexity of what's going on, you can't possibly, effectively lead complex organizations in a hierarchical, top-down manner. It just doesn't work. Here in the UK, and I think across the world right now, health and care systems are under enormous stress, enormous.

And how mostly they're being handled in the UK is that the central government is shoving new metrics down, if things aren't going well, they put a new target of what you should do, which actually doesn't help at all. It creates more unintended consequences, I would say at the very least.

Celine: But you can't invite *everybody* into *every* change. It's not how organizations work, right? And they're not supposed to be, I don't know, full democracies or it's gonna be chaotic and very difficult to run. How do you do that?

Myron: How much time do we have? :D



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Celine: A few minutes :)

Myron: So, first of all, I would say everybody is already engaged.

The entire system is engaged in creating its outcomes, right? One of the things that you do so well in *Dare to Un-Lead* is pointing out that the system has arisen through a variety of dynamics, of philosophies, ways of looking at the world, and that, as that's come into being, it is maintained over and over again by all of us, right? It is not someone doing something *to us*. It is us *doing this thing together*.

So I don't think you generally – although I have experienced this in my life, this long life – you don't get much evidence where in an organization, for instance, top down, everything, everybody is being engaged in everything that's going on, deliberately in an intentional way.

But you do get places, leaders being aware that tapping into the intelligence, the experience, the wisdom, the knowledge base of people who are actually doing the work – I mean, this would be another maxim: “those who do the work, do the change”, period.

They take whatever is given and they create it as something. I guess what I'm saying in brief is that we're always taking up everything around us and co-creating these outcomes. So everybody is engaged now. And then, if you understood that, how would you do it *intentionally* so that you could potentially move the organization into generating *reliably* the kinds of outcomes you want?

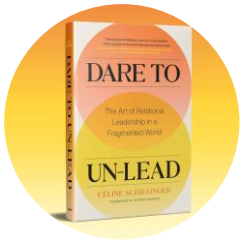
Celine: Another of the maxims is “real change happens in real work”. Is that a blow to all change management departments and transformation offices?

Myron: Yes :) One of the things that segregation rather than integration as an energy in systems does – the hierarchical mechanical model of work... When you assume that (there is a line in the foreword of the book, Celine) real change happens in real work, constantly the assumption that the best way to organize human endeavor is to organize it as a machine is exactly working against the dynamics of living systems.

When things are not that complex and when the environment is basically easier, working in the mechanical model does work. It brings you certain [outcomes].

I just believe that where we are now, that conceptual approach, that paradigm is a world people are tired of. The paradigm of the hierarchical mechanical (in the UK, the medical model) only produces consequences of the wrong kind. Of the unintended kind, I guess. It produces *sometimes* things that are good and right that we want, but...

The other piece of this is that mechanical model can no longer handle the complexity of what it is we're dealing with here. So, in the UK, using that again, cuz I'm quite deep into the health and care system, one of the things that's been generated over time is a very linear approach to how you do



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anything. So the system currently is overwhelmed with too many people demanding too many services and not enough medical personnel available to them.

What they have done is they break this work into smaller and smaller parts. They create a linear process for how you go through it.

I'm going through a medical issue right now... I had something diagnosed in June, and last week (January) I had my first appointment with the specialist who needed to look at me. So seven months, seven and a half months. In between. I had a number of tests going on. Those tests were done in a sequential manner first, this one, then that one, then that one, and then the results of those tests were not given to me. I had to chase them down. It took a lot of energy and whatnot. And then, there are multiple specialties in this, looking at this, they haven't spoken to each other. Right. So I'm the integrator in this case, right? Rather than [being served by an integrated system], and this is how complex systems work now, because they're living in the legacy of the mechanical model. This happens not just in health and care. It happens in many other endeavors of human beings.

It is that the system is just no longer capable. You can't improve it. You can't improve a linear system that gets thrown more and more complexity on it because at some point there's no more room.

Celine: So, to effect real positive change, where do we start?

Myron: First we ask, "Hey, what's going on?" I think this is in your book. To come back to leadership for a minute, there's something about leadership as hosting. Right? Inviting:

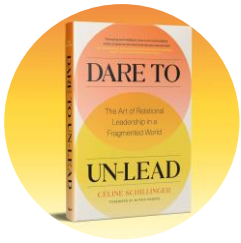
Here's a problem, here's an issue, here's something I as a leader think is critical to it. Where's the information? Where are the relationships? Where's the identity really, and how do we bring people together to actually think through things? How do we create a peer-based environment as well? Is understanding that we're not....

Hierarchy actually has a particular role still, and it's mostly about accountability for financial results, preservation of [resources], and ethical outcomes. So there's something that still needs a requirement. But as the leader of one of the major high techs that I worked with for years would always say: the organization chart, the organogram as it is called in England, has never been about how any of the work gets done. It is simply an accountability system that you have to pay attention to, but the real work of the system is not that at all.

Celine: So where do we start hosting, creating a peer-based culture? Hosting more than during a once-a-year town hall, right?

Myron: Right. This is how you make things go, all the time. I'd live with another maxim and this is: "start anywhere, follow it everywhere". And that is really about...

You know, people argue about how to start strategic change efforts; and they either do things at enormous scale and tons of money and organized messages, or they do an imposed kind of change:



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the organizational structure changes, we change the organogram for the millionth time, whatever it is doing now.

What I do is, basically, the system itself calls out an issue that it needs to work on. We get together with people and say, well, who's engaged in this? Who's affected by this issue and how? Can we build a design team that will bring its innate knowledge about the system and what's going on with it, and how it might be fixed, even if there's no agreement within that team about it, you bring them together. And the first step is getting clear about what the issue is. What are we really trying to do here?

With one client I have right now, last year we started this big, strategic change effort. That actually began with four people in a design team. The design team is now 90 people and we meet on a regular basis. And we do development together: what would be some good skills to learn in this kind of social change arena? What would be some good tools? How do we engage more broadly the system, bring them in the design team?

Unlike most consultants, I don't put myself in front of the group; I do it with the design team, and we co-present. We co-work, we co-facilitate and that's one way of doing it. You can grow a network of people whose capability and capacity for doing good system work, living system work, grows, and you have this network across the whole system. And it's different from cascading.

Celine: Is that an illustration of another one of the maxims? Possibly my dearest one, which is “the way we get to the future is the future we get”. Can you elaborate on that?

Myron: By the way, that one came about when I was working with you. That maxim showed up then. Can I talk about it? I don't know. People tend to not believe that who they are right now shows up in the world, right? That, often... what's the organizational equivalence of this? They say “oh, we don't wanna show our dirty laundry in public”. But everybody knows the dirty laundry, right?

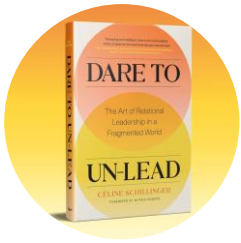
I mean, we all know that. So let's have the conversation about it, where it comes from, what it is.

I guess on this one “the process you use to get to the future is the future you get”, I will often say that if you're trying to do a collaborative, to build a collaborative organization... Many people now I think say, “we need more collaboration”, everywhere you go, it's about that. But you can't impose collaboration, right? And if you do, you don't get collaboration. You get something that's congruent with the way in which you're doing it.

Celine: You have to be a community in order to build a community, right?

Myron: You have to act as though you are a community. Act your way into it.

I did some work with the US Army many years ago, and they have a learning process that is about how you separate learning and the learning experience from the hierarchy; so that you see... The hierarchy has to exist for a variety of reasons in that particular situation. But if you wanna know



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what's going on on the ground and you wanna make good decisions together, you have to be in constant conversation, and that conversation has to be flat, equal, peer based. Because if it's not, you don't get the information you need about what's actually going on, and therefore you don't respond in the right way.

The other part of it is that you're building over time, you're building clarity about the complex identity that you need to maintain. I'm not just talking about the army here, I'm talking about anyone, any group of people. Part of the process you're using is to get to greater and greater clarity about what it is we're trying to do.

it's about this: the demands of the current moment. Everybody knows this. They quote (it's probably a misquote) they quote Einstein about how you can't solve a particular problem from the same thought or idea that created it. So people know this, right? But when you look at what they're doing, [they keep using old ideas].

People know what the future should look like, right? and I say this broadly and respectfully about how smart people are. In the health system for instance, the big push in the NHS in England is to create an integrated health and care system, that deals with health inequalities, with health of children and families and communities; Population Health that would be called, and it scales up so that what you're trying to do is create a healthy society and therefore the demand for health and care interventions goes down. There's other reasons for doing this obviously.

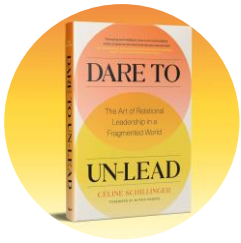
The problem is, you have the day-to-day problem of all these people in ambulances lined up before the door. There's no room for them to go into. So people try and fix this and they get fixated on what's right in front of them, and they try and fix it from the same consciousness that created it. The system will never be able to produce the outcomes that we need.

People do know this, so the question is, how do you take care of the current issue from the future? That's my current thinking about it: how do you get people to be standing in this current mess, whatever it is that's confronting them and to enact how you think about it, what you do with it, how you design, what, what goes on with it, from the future, [from the] view of the future you're trying to create.

Celine: Instead of isolating, for example, the ambulance part with ambulance experts and trying to solve that bit. Is that correct?

Myron: Exactly. I mean, and everyone knows this, ambulances waiting to unload people who need care at the hospital, are not because of what goes on with the ambulances, right? It has much more to do with the whole system that's going on. And you know, this isn't rocket science. The *view of it* isn't rocket science. Trying to *fix it* is big. Trying together about how to approach this.

Celine: You write in your foreword that some of the work we did together required courage. Why so?



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Myron: Well, what happened to you dear?

Celine: :D There are some things I can't say.

Myron: I think it does require courage because often, you think of first innovators, they're usually denied by the system that they're in. Innovation is often seen as a threat. And therefore there's pushback from the system to expel this person or these ideas or whatever else there is in it. And that's... people are often putting their careers on the line...

By the way, I don't believe that we should have organizations in which to do the right thing requires bravery. Why should you need courage to do the right thing? But we have created that, right?

We have, if you're a whistleblower, yet we're not talking about whistle blowing here. Actually, one of the aspects of the courage that's needed is to have some integrity about how it is you really think systems work and invite people into this process; but you'll constantly find resisters.

And the resisters often can be more powerful in terms of their position, positionality in the organization or the system. And that can have consequences for you or for anyone. Not being paid attention to, to being expelled in some way and your career [affected].

Celine: Brings me back to something I also learned from you and that is also very profound. A living system will only change to remain the same. Can you say something about it?

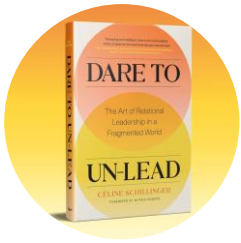
Myron: Well, it's actually two steps in that. One is that one of the fundamental things about living systems is that they seek to preserve their identity. It doesn't matter what happens. And so this is the thing about if you throw something at a system rather than co-creating it, it will take that thing and turn it back into itself.

Somehow, it'll make it meaningful for itself as it currently exists, not as you're trying to make it exist. However, a living system will change its identity in order to preserve it. So for me, that would let me stay with the health system again, and I'm sorry this is so much of that in it, but for me, the integrated view of health and care is the next step in realizing the full integrity of the health and care system in the UK, right?

So if you maintain the system as it is and try and fix it in that position, it will actually.... potentially it will die as a result of that because it actually needs the change in order to preserve itself.

Celine: And you speak a lot about health and care systems, but I know from experience from our work together that what you describe applies to all complex systems, industrial systems corporate systems et cetera. It's not at all limited to health and care.

Myron: Definitely. I've worked in the global corporate world for years and years. Led a lot of work in the United States on public education. I've worked in religious environments. I've worked in governments all over, so...



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Celine: In all those environments, what should change makers keep in mind? What would be your recommendation?

Myron: Well, always respect that the people who are doing the work are smart enough.

They have the information, they have the experience, they have the wisdom to actually contribute to a new possibility. Pay attention to, in the words of Marvin Weisbord, “what’s possible here and who really cares”.

The other thing is, I’m lucky right now, there are a couple of leaders that I work with who are just... my breath is taken away with how absolutely passionate they are and how wise they are and how willing to invite people in there. And, I would say that’s the thing that people need to pay attention to more: respect, compassion, caring for one another, the quality of relationships that we have. The purpose that we have. What really is the calling of the work that we’re engaged in ?

Celine. That’s awesome. I have no time to ask you about this wonderful book that is *A Simpler Way*, but I will really encourage all listeners to take a look. Mine has got all sorts of stickers and post-it notes and so on. It’s a really wonderful source of insights.

What would you say to somebody who hasn’t read *Dare To Un-Lead* yet? Apart from “read it!”, what would you say about the book?

Myron: I’d say has a great foreword :)

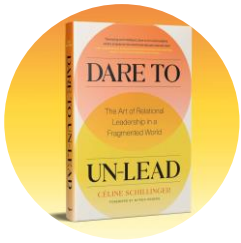
Celine: It does :) I know.

Myron: First of all, the liberty, equality, fraternity as a way of holding a different way of being together in the work, is really quite powerful. And, the other thing is, it illuminates so much of what’s contributing to things not going well.

And, so many examples of what it is you could do to actually make things work differently and produce different and more compelling, exciting outcomes. And, it’s got everything in there, right? It has history, it has theory, it has inspiring stories from people. I mean, it’s really, unlike a lot of business books or books for the kind of corporate or organizational audience, it’s quite accessible and readable and educational as well.

Celine: Thank you. And you’ve probably noticed that this trilogy, liberty equality fraternity, actually resonates with your trilogy. That’s why I adopted it. Your trilogy of identity, information and relationships.

Identity to me resonates very much with the freedom to choose who we want to be.



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Information relates to the flow of information, which should be free from patterns of domination and submission, which restrict access to information. So that's really about equality in diversity through networks.

And the quality of our relationships resonates very much with a sense of fraternity we can create in our organizations.

So, once again, your inspiration shows up throughout the structure of the book. Thank you so much, Myron. Do you have any concluding words? And we'd love to know also where people can find you.

Myron: People can find me, somewhere. So in, in a couple concluding things, one, just about our friendship. I guess I'd say, really congratulations for the book and, and for what you're doing with it and how you're being out there in the world with it. But also I'd love to see you in person sometime. It's been, I think five years because of Covid and as it, some health issues.

And between those two things, I haven't been traveling and so now back to traveling and I think I'd better come see the new office in person sometimes.

Celine: Yes :) But even though we haven't met in person for a long time you're very close to my mind and to my heart, Myron.

Myron: Thank you. People can find me at myron.rogers@gmail.com. That's my email and I would respond and I'd be happy to hear from anyone.

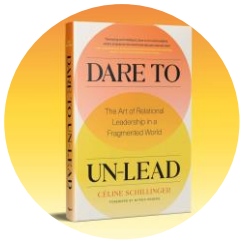
Celine: Thank you. And they can find you in your book, in my book and we'll post links in the description of the episode of course. Well, thank you so much, Myron. Thanks, and have a great rest of your year. Bye.

Myron: Thank you. Bye-bye.

Celine: Great insights. Thank you all for listening. You'll find more info in *Dare to Un-Lead*, the book. And all links in the podcast episode description.

And now what else? Action! To explore further and apply these ideas to your own context, reach out to me celine@weneedsocial.com

Let's un-lead together!



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Podcast resources

Myron Rogers and I met on social media around 2014, then in person over lunch in London and I left in awe. So many brilliant thoughts! That made so much sense!

His approach to organizations as living systems resonated with everything I instinctively perceived about what worked, or *didn't* work, in my job. After a first couple of experiences with movement building and people engagement, I was about to lead a global people engagement initiative around quality improvement at a vaccine manufacturer.

I realized upon meeting him that Myron had immense experience in his field, having pioneered the application of living systems theory to organizations. He was one of the co-inventors of the "World Café" collective conversation format, which has become widely used in all organizations seeking to engage more minds and hearts in decision-making. Myron basically knows everyone in the OD (organizational development) arena, and worked for many years with [Margaret J. Wheatley](#). Their collaboration produced a remarkable book: [A Simpler Way](#) (1999). When I met him, Myron had joined forces with [John Atkinson](#), an advisor on systems leadership.

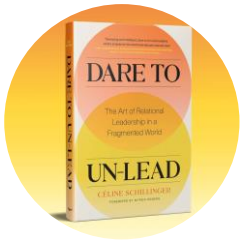
The three of us worked together on the quality improvement project. It was truly an eye opener for me – a source of much-needed knowledge which has served me immensely since. You can hear [Myron Rogers](#) explain in our podcast episode the key principles on which his change work (and now, mine too!) is based.

Curious to know more?

Read [Dare To Un-Lead: The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World](#). Myron wrote a beautiful foreword to the book. Here is one quote I love: "Bringing the future to life now isn't a smooth or easy journey. But it is one worth taking together"

Myron Rogers can be found in *Dare To Un-Lead*:

Author's work with, 100;
On being part of a system, 191;
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DARE TO UN-LEAD

The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World

The Podcast



Read 'A Simpler Way' - with [Margaret Wheatley](#) (1999). You can order it at [Berrett-Koehler](#) or [Amazon](#)

Watch <https://vimeo.com/202671286> This is a presentation Myron Rogers did in 2017 about system leadership in the NHS

Watch an earlier conversation between Myron and I: 'Can organizations really change?' (2021). I was in the process of writing the book then. <https://youtu.be/AKo8AJxWs5U>

Connect with Myron on [LinkedIn](#) and on [Twitter](#)

Curious to use these ideas in your work? Get in touch!

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