

True Influence Method™ White Paper

A Research-Based Human Development Process: Transforming Lived Experience Into Authentic Authority

By Joanna Horton McPherson

Executive Summary

Leadership development traditionally focuses on improving what a leader does: communication, confidence, strategy, performance, and executive presence. The **True Influence Method™** begins one level deeper, with the human being doing the leading. **Leadership is a transmission system.** A leader does not only transmit strategy, decisions, standards and knowledge. She transmits her relationship to power, safety, worth, truth, conflict, belonging and other human beings.

That means unresolved patterns can become organizational patterns. But the reverse is also true: **what a leader transforms within herself** can become a new possibility for everyone downstream of her leadership. The journey of this method is based on the McPherson's **healed leadership frameworks**, architecture in which one's personal development forms the basis of her legacy in her team, audience, and family.

Background

A leader's decisions, communication, relationships, and public voice are shaped not only by expertise, but by the meaning they have made from lived experience. Patterns such as self-doubt, perfectionism, over-functioning, approval-seeking, or fear of visibility may persist even after the circumstances that formed them have changed. As responsibility and influence increase, these private patterns can affect how leaders use their voice, exercise authority, build trust, and influence the people and systems they lead.

The **True Influence Method™**, developed by Joanna Horton McPherson, is a research-informed process for transforming lived experience into self-trust, authentic voice, and influential leadership. Drawing from inquiry-based education, psychology, emotional awareness, neuroscience, contemplative practice, motivational interviewing, and embodied performance, the Method helps leaders observe the emotional and developmental meaning beneath recurring patterns, discover rather than receive new insight, and reinterpret formative experience from the perspective of who they are now and the greater purpose they are positioned to serve.

The Process

The Practitioner of the method does not tell leaders who they are or what their experiences mean; through a container of psychological safety, present-moment observation, emotional inquiry, and reflective dialogue, the leader, or clientt becomes an observer of their own experience, and therefore an author of it. What was previously experienced only as pain, doubt, fear, or limitation in the form of subconscious patterns can be examined for the information it contains. Old interpretations become available for reconsideration, allowing the leader to distinguish a harmful inherited belief from a present truth, and move from dependence on external validation toward internal self-trust. The central transformation of the *True Influence Method*[™] develops a person through phases of inner growth:

Lived Experience → Emotional Awareness → New Meaning → Message → Greater Purpose → Embodied Voice → Influence → Impact → Legacy

The growth journey follows **5 training Phases**:

Phase 1: Have a breakthrough that transforms lived experience into self-understanding and self-trust.

Phase 2: Turn your personal insight into a message for your greater purpose that emotionally resonates with others.

Phase 3: Develop the skill to embody and communicate that message with authority.

Phase 4: Expand that authority through your team, stages/media, and public visibility.

Phase 5: Turn influence into an enduring contribution that upgrades people, systems and ultimately leaves your legacy.

Private Life as the Foundation for Public Leadership

Unlike personal development approaches whose end is internal insight, the True Influence Method[™] applies that transformation into **public leadership with a greater purpose**. The leader identifies the perspective uniquely formed through their experience, articulates it as a clear point of view, translates it into a message others can recognize themselves within, and learns to embody that message in speaking, leadership, media, and business. They do this to help make the world a better place, or leave a **legacy**.

The result is not simply greater confidence or better communication but accepting the fundamental premise that one's **private understanding and public expression are aligned**. Because leadership originates in the truth of one's (often painful) lived experience rather than performance, the leader can communicate with greater emotional resonance, build trust, create safety & belonging, and move others toward meaningful action.

The *True Influence Method*[™] uses foundational research spanning three domains:

1. **Transformation:** identifying the meaning beneath limiting patterns and developing greater self-trust, clarity, and conscious choice;
2. **Emotional Resonance:** translating lived insight into an authentic message and embodied public voice that a person, team or audience can feel and remember; and,
3. **Measurable Outcomes:** converting trust, clarity, and emotional resonance into stronger engagement, demand, relationships, and growth.

The larger premise of the method is that **leadership becomes more effective when the human being beneath it becomes more integrated, or healed**. What leaders have not consciously understood can be reproduced through their decisions, relationships, cultures, and systems. What realizations or **healing** they integrated can become wisdom and lessons available to others.

The *True Influence Method*[™] therefore treats a leader's lived experience not as history to overcome, but as a source of differentiated authority. When experience becomes insight, insight becomes self-trust and an embodied message, **the healed leader becomes the source** of the influence they needed.

I. Transformation

a. Inquiry-Based Learning

Most leadership development focuses on “increasing confidence” but fails to address the root cause of doubt. Leadership is deeply personal, so overcoming personal constraints requires a fundamental shift in perspective rather than incremental growth. Inquiry-based learning creates this shift.

Education theorist **Eleanor Duckworth** demonstrated that learning occurs not when ideas are explained, but when individuals actively reorganize their own thinking through inquiry. In her foundational paper in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Duckworth writes that “the having of wonderful ideas is what I consider the essence of intellectual development” (Duckworth, 1972: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3694868>).

In later work at the *Harvard Graduate School of Education*, Duckworth described the educator's role as “putting [others] at ease, inviting them to talk about and keep thinking about their ideas, and reacting to the substance of their answers without judging them” (Duckworth, 2005: <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/08/05/critical-exploration-classroom>).

A longtime collaborator of human development theorist **Jean Piaget**, Duckworth formalized *critical exploration* as the method through which genuine insight occurs. In this model, learning emerges through intuitive, learner-guided inquiry rather than a teacher's instruction.

Duckworth later remarked in a Harvard course that Joanna, a student, showed exceptional use of critical exploration to unlock learning in a way Duckworth had not seen before in the classic “phases of the moon” exercise (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2013).

b. Adaptation, Attachment, and Authenticity

The *True Influence Method*[™] approaches self-doubt, perfectionism, over-functioning, approval-seeking, silence, and other limiting patterns not simply as behaviors to correct, but as adaptations whose original purpose can be understood.

This orientation is informed by the work of physician and author **Dr. Gabor Maté**, whose trauma-informed framework examines the relationship between early experience, attachment, authenticity, stress, and later patterns of behavior. Rather than asking only what is wrong with a behavior, Maté's work directs attention toward what happened, what the response may once have protected, and why an adaptation may continue after the conditions that produced it have changed.

Within the *True Influence Method*[™], the Practitioner uses inquiry to help the individual become curious about the origin and purpose of a recurring response. What appears in adulthood as a limitation may have originated as an intelligent attempt to preserve attachment, safety, belonging, or identity. When an individual understands a pattern rather than judging it, the pattern becomes available for examination. The question shifts from “*What is wrong with me?*” toward “*Why did I make this mean, what was I trying to survive, and what do I know now?*” This creates the conditions for an old adaptation to be reconsidered from the perspective of the person the leader has become.

Maté, G., & Maté, D. (2022). *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture*. Avery.

c. Present-Moment Awareness: Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Practice

The observational practice within the *True Influence Method*[™] is also informed by the discipline of **present-moment awareness found within Tibetan Buddhist meditation**: attending to what is arising in experience before immediately judging, changing, or interpreting it.

Rather than assuming what an individual's words or emotional response mean, the Practitioner observes closely and reflects what she notices. One of the recurring questions within the Method brings the client present to the moment to be aware of, or “save,” new ideas, ex: “*What did you hear me say?*”, “*What is happening in your body right now?*” or “*What are you seeing?*”

The question intentionally returns the individual to noticing the present moment, bypassing “thinking” and “analyzing.” Instead of being given the Practitioner's interpretation, the individual is asked to notice what they themselves heard by tapping into gut-level sensation and truth, to “hear” messages or “notice” what arose internally, and what meaning they recognize from those messages.

The Practitioner therefore does not become the authority on another person's internal experience. **The Practitioner observes and reflects; the individual observes themselves and discovers.** The distinction between observation and interpretation creates space for information that might otherwise be obscured by an existing story, judgment, or assumption. Present-moment awareness allows the individual to encounter what is actually arising before deciding what it means. Within the *True Influence Method*[™], this creates the

conditions for insight to emerge through self-discovery rather than suggestion.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*. First published 1984. Shambhala Publications.

Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Shambhala Publications, 1997.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *The Path Is the Goal: A Basic Handbook of Buddhist Meditation*. Shambhala Publications, 1995 edition.

d. New Perspectives Through Motivational Interviewing

Research in Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rolnick, *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People to Change Addictive Behavior*, 1991) shows that **lasting growth occurs through identity-level perspective shifts rather than incremental skill-building**.

Transformation occurs when an individual safely experiences emotion from the perspective of learning for a greater purpose. The *True Influence Method*™ interview approach asks the learner questions naming and connecting meaning with feeling and experience.

During the interview, or session, the individual moves from the first-person experience of “my pain” into an observer stance of “what is happening,” reframing the experience as meaningful rather than reliving it as trauma. This aligns with evidence that conscious awareness alters meaning structures in the brain (Lieberman et al., *Psychological Science*, 2007: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01916.x>).

Adopting this vantage point **allows the brain to release self-limiting predictions** and integrate new meaning, producing the “aha” moment associated with increased self-trust, resilience, and clarity under stress (Siegel, *The Developing Mind*).

II. Emotional Resonance

a. Emotional Language: *The Feelings Wheel*

The *True Influence Method*™ uses emotional experience as information. For that information to become useful, however, an individual must first be able to identify what they are actually feeling.

Psychologist Dr. Gloria Willcox’s *Feelings Wheel* provides a practical framework for expanding emotional vocabulary and differentiating broad emotional states into more precise feelings. Within the *True Influence Method*™, it may be used when an individual has difficulty identifying or articulating an internal experience.

The wheel does not determine what someone feels. It gives the individual language with which to observe themselves more precisely. The Practitioner may ask, “*What are you feeling?*” and invite the individual to identify the word that most accurately reflects what is present.

Emotional language converts **a subconscious internal reaction into information** that can be explored. Once a feeling is named, inquiry can move beneath it toward the experience, belief, memory, or meaning connected to it. Emotion becomes not something to suppress or solve, but information through which deeper meaning can be discovered.

Willcox, G. (1982). “The Feeling Wheel: A Tool for Expanding Awareness of Emotions and Increasing Spontaneity and Intimacy.” *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 12(4), 274–276.

b. Foundational Science: Emotion and the Subconscious

Insights arise by reframing old meaning within the subconscious mind according to a new, greater vision. To create a reframe, the learner accesses ideas beyond the conscious mind through their emotional experience. When individuals encounter formative or emotionally charged events, root causes such as doubt often surface through limbic processing, manifesting as felt emotion, self-questioning, and deeply held personal beliefs.

When emotions are consciously attended to from a reflective vantage point with a greater purpose in mind, the brain can update the meaning associated with them. This naturally causes former, limiting beliefs to reorganize and integrate into awareness of lessons. The information behind the experience applies now as insight on behalf of a bigger purpose. This new meaning recategorizes beliefs, moving a person out of self-doubt into self-trust (Zaltman, *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, 2003; Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 2010:

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/307552/self-comes-to-mind-by-antonio-damasio/>; Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, 1994:

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/34045/descartes-error-by-antonio-damasio/>;

LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, 1996:

<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Emotional-Brain/Joseph-E-LeDoux/9780684836599>).

c. Mirror Neurons and Embodied Influence

Mirror neuron research demonstrates that observing another person’s emotional expressions activates similar neural systems in the observer, supporting empathy, shared emotional experience, and social learning (Rizzolatti et al., University of Parma; overview:

<https://www.nature.com/articles/nn.2809>). This mechanism explains why emotionally authentic speakers create resonance and increased engagement. Speakers who simply talk from a script, however, elicit little change in the audience. When people know they belong, and feel part of something bigger, they feel less “socially distant,” which increases long-term cooperation https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/211008_Social_Skills_Dimitriadis_Koning_opn2.pdf_2b64c70b-bo86-426c-a372-b21ed5d86d53.pdf).

d. The Sanford Meisner “Emotional Honesty” Technique

The *True Influence Method*[™] integrates the Sanford Meisner’s “emotional honesty” technique. The Meisner technique is a toolbox of skills actors use to access the gut-level knowledge, within body and emotional life, in order to live truthfully. The key to the technique is attuning to the gut impulse, or intuitive “pinch” in front of the audience, resulting in a natural, unefforted and authentic stage presence. This naturalness is simply magnetic, as it resonates feeling, giving “goosebumps” in the audience. Used by business speakers, this allows for real connection with the audience’s internal experience before offering solutions (Dickerson & Hasson, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2017: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00031/full>).

Meisner, Sanford, and Dennis Longwell. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.

III. Measurable Outcomes

Emotionally resonant communication produces substantially higher engagement and conversion than traditional sales messaging. LinkedIn research shows that content provoking emotional insight consistently outperforms informational content (*The Art and Science of Video*, 2025:

https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/business/marketing-solutions/global/en_US/site/pdf/wp/2025/the-art-and-science-of-video.pdf).

Once **emotional resonance** is established, individuals are more likely to stay engaged, remember the message, and engage in action,

Harvard Business Review documents that emotionally aligned strategies outperform competitors, citing cases with up to 40% growth in new accounts (Magids et al., *Harvard Business Review*, 2015: <https://hbr.org/2015/11/the-new-science-of-customer-emotions>).

Similarly, one study found that communication and speaking skills training increased entrepreneur revenue by 20% (S. Dimitriadis,

<https://pubsonline.informs.org/doi/10.1287/mnsc.2022.4334>).

Case Study 1: Global Leader

Client Profile Deborah, senior leader in public service. Co-author of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Initial Constraint

As Deborah approached retirement, she wrote a book, but with an excess of messages and no unifying point of view, was unable to go speak and lead. Despite decades of influence and leadership, she could not articulate a singular voice expressing the greater message she carries.

She wanted to speak publicly and create greater impact as a mentor in the public service sector, but lacked clarity about what she was uniquely positioned to offer. Scattered and unfocused.

Mechanism of Shift

Through many sessions with structured self-reflection and guided inquiry, Deborah articulated the meaning of her accumulated achievements as tied to the lessons of her lived experience. By identifying a coherent throughline of theme and belief across her career, she found identity-level clarity that easily converted into the talk she soon began to deliver in public.

Outcome

Deborah developed a focused public talk grounded in lived authority and is now authoring her next book, oriented toward preparing and mentoring young women entering public service.

Resulting Domain of Impact

Public service leadership, legacy articulation, and authorship.

Case Study 2: Executive Purpose

Client Profile Clint, former CNN Executive Producer

Initial Constraint

After personal losses in the season of career retirement as a successful journalist and producer, Clint experienced a collapse in meaning and direction. With great unspoken emotional burden, Clint examined issues with trust and disconnection from sense of purpose that had previously guided his work. Depressed, lonely and unsure.

Mechanism of Shift

Rather than attempting to generate a new mission, the work centered on restoring psychological safety and allowing implicit values to surface. By articulating what still mattered and naming previously unspoken grief, purpose emerged through integration rather than reinvention.

Outcome

Clint re-engaged in collaborative media work and co-created an equine therapy program with his son, who is recovering from traumatic brain injury. Together, they now serve their local community through healing-centered programming.

Resulting Domain of Impact

Meaning restoration, community service, and family-integrated leadership.

Case Study 3: Business Growth

Client Profile Andrea, wealth advisor for millionaire entrepreneurs, podcast host, and senior executive

Initial Constraint

Following her own business exit, Andrea took on a senior leadership role, but felt aimless, going through the motions. She questioned if she had a greater purpose. In early sessions, she described herself as “nothing special,” dismissing the idea that her experience held broader meaning. Low self-worth, self-doubt.

Mechanism of Shift

Through sustained inquiry, Andrea articulated a discrepancy between her dismissal of purpose and the emotional imprint of her early experiences witnessing her parents’ struggles with money. This reframed her personal history into a coherent theory of wealth, grounded in transition, dignity, and identity.

Outcome

Within a year, Andrea left her VP role, launched a new company, built an active client base, and entered the speaking circuit, including the TEDx stage. She now works as a successful wealth coach with a framework and course training entrepreneurs to exit, while maintaining flexibility to travel with her family.

Resulting Domain of Impact

Entrepreneurial leadership, wealth identity, financial success, and elevated public-speaking.

Case Study 4: Healing Fear

Client Profile Monique, owner of a financial services and escrow company with over 35 years in the industry

Initial Constraint

Although Monique had successfully transformed her company culture and increased revenue and client service by 20 percent in her first year of ownership, she experienced severe stomach knots and fear when speaking publicly. The anxiety was persistent and somatic, limiting her visibility despite professional recognition. Panic, fear and self-doubt.

Mechanism of Shift

Through reflective work, Monique identified an early-formed belief regarding her effectiveness that had remained unexamined. As awareness increased and internal coherence was restored, the nervous system response associated with public speaking resolved without exposure-based training.

Outcome

Monique now hosts a popular podcast, speaks regularly on public stages, and reports no physical pain and minimal fear when presenting. Her visibility has increased substantially, accompanied by continued awards, media features, and unprecedented business growth.

Resulting Domain of Impact

Embodied leadership, public visibility, and increased financial performance.

Client Experience

“Joanna brought a level of safety and clarity to our team that exceeded expectations. The impact was immediate and lasting.” – *Karen Johnson, CEO, New Pathways for Youth*

“In this past year of working with Joanna, I have booked more talks and our business revenue increased by six figures.” – *Monica May-Dunn, CEO & Owner, Arizona Escrow and Financial*

Conclusion: Beyond Influence to Legacy

The *True Influence Method*™ represents a structural shift in how influence operates in leaders who address an audience. In a time when leadership appears scarcity-minded and scripted, the Practitioner trains growth-oriented leaders to have the competitive advantage.

In a time when they seek rare and authentic truth, leaders in the *True Influence Method*™ define the next era of trust and leadership. The implication is profound: authentic, heartfelt, human-level influence generates a truthfulness in their presence.. In the time of AI and the question of human obsolescence, the healed leader creates indestructible environments of face-to-face, heart-to-heart connection in which safety, trust and belonging bring out the best in other. Their influence drives the value we place on others and their unique contributions above everything else.

Client Experience

“Working with Joanna Horton McPherson has been nothing short of life-changing. Her skill, patience and intuition make her truly rare and exceptional. I can't recommend her enough for anyone seeking meaningful change in their life.” – *Deborah Rugg, Author & Consultant, Retired Secretary to the United Nations and Director at CDC*

The *True Influence Method*™ in Practice

The Practitioner's method uses deep inquiry through honest and trusting interview-style dialogue to subconsciously reframe meaning by:

- Establishing psychological safety and caring support
- Naming a disorienting dilemma
- Entering emotional awareness of pain

- Reflecting in dialogue that checks and reforms meaning
- Forming and integrating a new self-concept within a greater purpose
- Guiding the greater purpose into messaging and delivery as a speaker

This work occurs within a supportive relationship that validates emotional truth as safe and welcome, allowing clients to move from self-monitoring to self-discovery.

Client Experience

“I felt most of my life like I’ve been living under concrete. After working with Joanna, I finally feel free, like I can breathe. Her process changed me in my DNA.” – *Abby Robinson, CEO & Founder, Hands-Off Investing*

Appendix: Signature Talk Framework

The method’s proprietary talk structure is experiential rather than informational. Speakers enter the emotional reality of the audience, validate felt experience, introduce a new perspective, and illuminate the solution they offer that relieves the problem. None of this approach relies on typical sales or speaking tactics like urgency or persuasion. The *True Influence Method™* Talk Template:

- **Hook**
Orients the reader through a recognizable human experience, establishing relevance through the leader’s lived experience of the problem.
- **Problem Statement**
Defines the client’s challenge at the level of felt experience that may limit scale, trust, or impact.
- **Shift (Insight)** Introduces a perspective on the problem that validates what is known, but reinterprets familiar data to illuminate a deeper truth, framing the response to pain as the path to change.
- **Solution Statement**
Articulates the method or approach that addresses the pain of the problem to bring relief, insight or freedom.
- **How It Works (Proprietary Process)**
Demonstrates the mechanism of change, usually in a 3-step “special sauce” framework that connects insight to action.
- **Social Proof**
Uses illustrative examples to validate the outcomes by showing the work in practice that changes a client’s life.

- **Takeaways**
Synthesizes the message into 3 durable insights that can be remembered.
- **Call to Action**
Concludes with an actionable invitation to connect on behalf of the solution.

This structure is powerful because it earns attention and action through experience, not pressure. **Dale Carnegie**, the American writer and lecturer best known for *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), teaches that attention is not won by merely stating a truth, the truth must be made “vivid, interesting, dramatic.” What makes the Talk Template especially effective is that it does not start with what you do, it starts with what the audience is living, then guides them to a deeper meaning, or “why,” and only then offers *how*. That sequencing reflects **Simon Sinek**’s core insight that influence is earned through purpose and belief: “People don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it,” highlighting the speaker’s inspiration as a powerful way to influence audience behavior (Sinek, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, 2009).

Client Experience

“I didn’t just have one talk. I had several, each powerful enough to launch my brand and connect deeply with my audience.” – *Tina Moser, Founder & CEO, Business Wealth Advisory*