

The Fisherman's Path to Leadership

224 Lessons from the Wisdom of Nature

OLEG KONOVALOV

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PRAISES

“The Fisherman’s Path to Leadership is unique, compelling, practically inspiring, and a great story-filled read. It might not inspire you to head to sea or pick up a fishing rod, but it will definitely make you think again about leadership and how you practice it.”

STUART CRAINER

Cofounder of Thinkers50

“Oleg Konovalov’s unique perspective challenges traditional notions of leadership by drawing lessons from the world around us. Through captivating stories and practical advice, Oleg shares his wealth of experience as an executive coach, offering a fresh and thought-provoking approach to leadership. This book is a valuable resource for anyone seeking to enhance their leadership skills and uncover new perspectives on what it means to be an effective leader.”

DR. MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

Thinkers50 #1 Executive Coach and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Earned Life*, *Triggers*, and *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*

“At the beginning of mankind, tribes read the signs from the earth and the sea and transformed them as learnings from nature for their survival.

In the 21st century, Oleg Konovalov – in his book *The Fisherman’s Path to Leadership* – applies this technique of what the huge Atlantic Ocean and the fishing industry, as well as recreational fly fishing, teach us how to progress in our leadership styles of today.

It is hard-earned learnings from stormy weather, a tough working environment, together with salty seamen, but also from special places of solitude and relaxation followed by enlightening insights on modern leadership.

It is truly a continuous learning experience from everyday life and hardship at sea. Far away from schools, MBAs, and academia, but learning made from actions and reflections.

A must-read for those who believe in lifelong learning and growing big, from small insights, nature as a source is offering us!

The book brings me back to childhood and growing in Smaland, Sweden (redneck county), and moves me to the future, with new great insights for my individual leadership development. It is a book with glimmering happiness and written in a spiritual and jaunty way! Go for it!”

STEFAN LORENTZSON

Senior Vice President Communications, CSR, PA
and Brand, Volvo Groups Trucks Operations

“In this engaging and lively book, renowned management thought leader Oleg Konovalov demonstrates how what some might look at as a leisure activity – fishing – can have a profound impact on our understanding of leadership and the new world of work.

Oleg’s approach to mastering management artfully blends soothing stories of serene river fishing with thrilling high-sea adventures. This captivating combination offers deep insights into the art of leadership.”

ALF REHN

Professor of innovation, design and management
at Faculty of Engineering, University of Southern
Denmark, Thinkers50

“Oleg Konovalov is a globally recognized Master in vision and visionary leadership and a professional fishing expert. In his ‘The Fisherman’s Path to Leadership’ book, he offers timeless wisdom for leaders at all levels. Oleg’s decades of experience facing the natural forces illuminate the path to becoming a great leader. His unique perspective offers readers a fresh and enlightening way to understand and enhance their leadership skills.

We are part of nature, we learn from nature, and nature makes us better. Oleg illustrates how the wisdom of nature can be harnessed to become a better leader and reminds us that nature is a source of inspiration

and guidance. Whether you are an aspiring leader or a seasoned executive, this thought-provoking book offers invaluable practical lessons and tips that will resonate with anyone seeking to enhance their leadership skills and deepen their connection with nature.”

JENNY M. FERNANDEZ

Chief Marketing Officer at Loacker, Columbia
Business & NYU Professor, HBR contributor

“In his new book, Oleg Konovalov teaches us that nature is the wisest leadership coach available and one that helps us to become better with every interaction. In a deceptively simple, and yet unmistakably profound approach, he shares with us life experiences and wisdom as if we were sitting around a campfire after a day of fishing. If you spend any time in nature, you’ll recall those moments when you catch a shadow of something from the corner of your eye, a momentary glimpse, and then it’s gone.

Oleg’s writing freezes the moment and helps us step back and observe. He shines a light on what is seen and experienced in a way that captures the moment and brings clarity. He helps us slip through the veil of what’s on the surface to see a glimpse of what’s beneath and within. But he doesn’t leave us simply observing. He offers an invitation to join in the journey of growth.

“The book is about mindset and mastery, a valuable, pragmatic, and profoundly insightful observation of nature, self, and leadership. It reminds us that we are connected with everything and are all connected (more than we know). It invites us to step away from striving and toward receiving. With engaging storytelling, humor, and humble self-disclosure, Oleg shares lessons that lead us to discovery, wonder, and a new vision of the abundance around us. My greatest compliment is that the first two people with whom I’ll share this book are my son and daughter. Those who will shape the future of leadership need this book.”

ROBERT SUNDELIUS

FACHE, Chair at FriendsLearn and TAMP,
Global Deeptech Award Winner

“They say fishermen are some of the wisest people in the world. If so, *The Fisherman’s Path to Leadership* is a treasure trove of insights into true leadership. Oleg Konovalov distills his years of experience on the North Atlantic fishing trawlers and his passion for fly fishing into the book that unlocks secrets to leadership success. It is full of stories that make you think and may help you ‘land the big ones’ in your leadership journey.”

JOHN BALDONI

Thinkers 360 Top 10 Thought Leader, executive coach and author of 16 books, including *Grace Under Pressure: Leading Through Change and Crisis*

“A truly refreshing look at the nature of work, success, leadership, and life. Leadership, like fishing, requires patience, adaptability, courage, and connectedness to the environment. This is a must-read for leaders who seek to understand the undercurrents of human emotion and the power of our full being.”

LUDMILA PRASLOVA

Professor of Organizational Psychology, Vanguard
University of Southern California, HBR contributor,
author of *The Canary Code: A Guide to Neurodiversity
and Intersectional Belonging in the Workplace*

“Dr. Oleg Konovalov takes his readers on a delightful journey, blending deep thinking and fishing trips. With captivating tales and thought-provoking reflections, he imparts timeless lessons on patience, wisdom, vision, resilience, decision-making, and deep learning. Through his enchanting storytelling, vivid imagery transports readers to the heart of each fishing trip, leaving them enriched with wisdom and grace to navigate life’s uncertainties. Dive into this world of fishing trips, where patience becomes bait and wisdom the ultimate ‘catch of the day’ reward. Highly recommended.”

DR. ABE KHOUREIS

Professor, Ambassador of Compassionate Leadership,
Multi-talented Thought Leader

“The Fisherman’s Path to Leadership is a gem! In this book, Dr. Oleg Konovalov shares his wisdom about what we can learn from nature to become a better leader. Packed with thought-provoking stories and illuminating lessons, it challenges our thinking about how to adapt faster and grow through life’s storms. Living in an era of AI we can neglect our connection to nature. This book brings us back to how to be nature-wise and to tap the transformational lessons available in Konovalov’s many fishing trips. This is a compelling guide to leadership from one of the world’s wisest leadership experts.”

SIOBHÁN MCHALE

CHRO, change leader, and author of *The Hive Mind at Work* and *The Insider’s Guide to Culture Change*

“Oleg Konovalov took an insightful approach by applying the lessons learned from his earlier fishing job and leadership characteristics. The book is full of real-life fishing examples and reflections on nature, people, and businesses. The book is fantastic by all measures; it is a streamlined reference for anyone who wants to grasp leadership concepts holistically.

I had yet to learn that all these leadership skills could be learned through fishing, contemplation in nature, and interaction with people who share the same hobby.

Reading this inspirational book is a true pleasure.”

KAMAL Y. AL-SHIHABY

CEO, Vigilance Consulting, Bahrain

“Why can the cost of a passenger be very high to us? Why should I trust my tackle anyway? What does ‘Keep it tight and it will come’ have to do with overwhelming pressure? And why on earth should I call the captain when I’m in doubt? What has learning to tie a knot to do with simplicity or casting upstream with expanding the mindset? So many weird questions but so many great answers in this book by Oleg Konovalov, explaining what he learned from the

teachings of mother nature he observed while fishing for so many years. He also explains where we belong as human beings and how we can reach our potential as a leader and become a visionary. Simple and short written but full of wisdom to internalize.”

ZEYNEP DICLELI ERDOGAN

General Manager at Optimist Yayın Grubu, Turkey

“The Fisherman’s Path to Leadership is an exceptional book that brilliantly weaves together the art of fishing with invaluable leadership insights. This captivating read is a refreshing departure from traditional leadership literature, as it entwines real-life fishing experiences with 224 profound lessons for personal and professional growth. Whether you’re a seasoned leader or an aspiring one, the timeless wisdom shared within these pages is an indispensable asset for achieving success. I highly recommend it!”

FRANK SONNENBERG

Award-winning author of 10 books including
Leadership by Example

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INTRODUCTION

Days spent fishing are not counted the same as normal life. Fishing makes me feel like a true and authentic human. It reveals the truth about my personality.

My grandfather infused me with a love of fishing when I was five. I've been hooked on it ever since. It's my favorite way of connecting with nature. I have learned from nature much more than from years of formal education. Humans are only a part of nature. We can't create or invent anything smarter or better than nature does. It is an infinite source of learning.

No AI can beat or will ever change the emotions and feelings of a human that is connected with nature. We train AI to think like a human, but we can't train AI to think and be emotional, to be connected with nature.

There is no time for drama when fishing. This is about deep thinking, hard work, and an enhanced mindset. Little thought, nothing caught.

I was always chasing large fish that demanded opening my mind to a greater extent every time. Every fishing trip is a lesson in leadership, strategy, marketing, and personal growth.

I wrote this book intending to share my lessons as if I would be sharing them with my friends whilst sitting around a campfire. My hope is that you will not stop with this book, that it whets your appetite to have your own experience. I invite you to dive into nature and gain practical lessons for yourself.

FIRST TRIP

Back in 1995, I made my first trip as an engineer on a small 18-meter-long wooden trawler, “Sealgear,” which means “Sea Hunter” in Gaelic. We went from Aberdeen, Scotland to the rough waters between the Shetland Islands and Faroe Islands, in November, the time of storms and strong winds. Our skipper, Andy Craig was well-known for such trips and had a number of conflicts with the fishing authorities over his navigational and fishing styles. In simple words, Andy was some kind of North Sea goodwill pirate. The crew members were similar.

Six crew members were on board an old ship that was making its last trip before decommissioning into needles, and the main engine had a lot of problems. My role was to make sure that the engine wouldn’t die during the trip, help with the trawl, and gut fish restlessly.

In simple words, over these twelve days, I slept a few hours, ate a few oranges, drank many cups of tea, gutted tons of cod, and was in engine oil up to my ears. Actually, facing a severe storm on a small boat is the best detox one can have. I remember vomiting non-

stop for days, and still doing my work. If you want to have a good body detox, don't pay money for a fancy spa, get paid for working at sea.

After days of rolling waves, we headed home and could see the Aberdeen fish market quay. The last mile to such an anticipated firm land. And, with a loud banging noise the main engine stopped straight in the middle of the harbor gates. We almost blocked the way into port.

I flew down to the engine room and fixed the problem in minutes. One of the cylinders was dead, the oil pressure was far into the red zone, and a couple of other nasty things. Thanks to paying attention to unusual noises during the trip I was able to locate the problem promptly. A few long minutes of frantic work and a few curses and I had the engine working. I don't know what helped most, the work or the curses.

We made a very good trip in terms of money for the company and the crew and celebrated in the pub. Finally, we relaxed, and I had a chance to ask our skipper, Andy why he goes to sea in such weather.

Andy responded with a smile. "I love fishing in storms when other boats are in the harbor. It means less fish on the market and prices are high. We are not getting salaries; we are getting shares. That means our shares are much greater. We are the co-owners of this trip.

Also, only tough and hard-working guys sign up for such a trip. Lazy people stay home.”

I recall this conversation many times when coaching my clients.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- If something could go wrong, it will go wrong.
Nothing is over until you are at the shore.
- Tough reality reveals opportunities.
- Sometimes you need to cross the ocean under a pirate flag.
- Professionalism is revealed in facing challenges.
Always appreciate and reward them. They are in command of success.
- Confident captain, confident crew.
- Dirty hands always bring food to the table.
There are no passengers on board a trawler.

I'M THE STORM

We all know about seasickness. In fact, only a few people don't have it. This is normal for all humans, to a greater or lesser extent, regardless if you are a beginner or an experienced seafarer. The only difference is that the experienced know how to adapt faster.

When we witness such incredible instability during a storm, our body and mind read conflicting signals which leads to reactions causing muscles to contract and nausea. Psychologically, if you are afraid that you will get seasick, you will feel sick. Therefore, take it easy, and keep doing your job.

First, I felt sick when facing a force-five storm. Soon, I adapted to a force-seven storm and felt okay. Then I faced something truly fierce and violent – a force-eleven storm. The small trawler, 38-meters long fighting against 10-16-meter-high waves that could crush everything. My stomach was somewhere in my throat, my brain begged for a few seconds of stability and calmness, and my body wasn't mine. I don't remember feeling it somehow.

The distance from my cabin to the engine room which usually was covered in seconds took about twenty minutes of clinging to every wall, handrail, and whatever I was able to get my hands on.

No one and nothing can help in such a 36-hour survival test. We were days away from the nearest safe harbor. The faces of all my crewmates were of a dollar-green color.

In these situations, everyone turns to God.

Yet, before long, I realized something – I enjoyed storms. After the force-eleven, I loved standing on the deck feeling like I was surfing. I realized that by growing through the storms I become the storm myself.

The main challenge is psychological. Growth is associated with enhanced psychological ability. You are either a leader who stands firm and does what must be done regardless of circumstances or you give up and let others fail.

Success is a port you can only reach through the storm. This rough passage demands two key elements – the ability to grow beyond our own fears and limitations and the ability to change and adapt to fast-changing realities. This is an absolutely essential ability to become a true leader.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Be a storm yourself that is stronger than forthcoming challenges.
- The leader is responsible for leading people into the future. She defines a vision that is much greater than herself and the organization. No one can lead something so huge without the ability to grow and change.
- If a leader fails to conduct his or her duty, the team will fail.
- Change will be painful. The growth is rewarded.
- No storm lasts forever.
- Psychological strength is key for any leader.
- If you can challenge yourself, you can withstand any storm.
- Courage to face the storm is a skill that develops with experience. It doesn't make you fearless but makes you experienced.

A LOST WHALE

A fish caught makes me happy. A fish lost still makes me happy, just with a pinch of disappointment.

Something strong took my fly and pulled the line down into the deep pool like a nuclear submarine diving deep. How can something so huge fit into a small river? After about fifteen minutes of maneuvering underwater, this monster broke the surface and showed its shiny top fin and tail, then went deep down again. After a few full laps around the pool and a few bruises on my fingers made by the screeching reel, it came to the surface again showing its strong body. This salmon was more than twenty kilos and filled with the energy of a small nuclear reactor. She looked at me curious about what kind of a fisherman she caught today, snapped a fly and elegantly waved her tail “bye.”

Back home I shared this drama with my family. Of course, it was a fish the size of a dolphin. After I calmed down with a shot of whiskey, I reevaluated my view – it was a whale, at least, just a river breed.

A few trips later, something similar happened again. A whooping pull, and a feeling of fishing for a submarine. This time, I didn't even see the salmon. The fish ran about two hundred meters upstream, crossed the rapids into the next pool, sharply turned around, and then dragged me a few hundred meters downstream. She pulled the line off the reel and played with me like a puppet. I lost my breath running around trying to get it under control, but nothing worked. This time I didn't even get a kiss goodbye.

If at first I was overexcited thinking how great a fisherman I am, this time I blamed myself mercilessly. This was a one-time chance to catch an incredible fish that I didn't manage to keep under control.

The first time I speculated on my illusive projection of how big the fish was and feeding my ambitions, whereas the second time I was evaluating my capacity to handle such a large fish.

Hearing similar stories from others, I gradually noticed the pattern – successful guys garnish their stories with disappointment about themselves, whereas novices get overexcited about their abilities.

What lies behind these different reactions when a huge fish says, "Boo?" I talked to my friends with similar experiences and found two interesting feelings shared by all.

The first one is fear. Actually, a twofold fear.

The fear of facing something big and strong could be shocking. I want to catch a large fish but am afraid to land it. This makes me think if the fish was so huge, why not thank God for getting me away from the fish?

This kind of fear comes when we are not prepared as fishermen or as leaders. It makes us do something we regret after. We give up without even fighting for something possible to achieve. Success is never big; this is us being too small and unprepared to have it. This was the reason behind losing that second large fish. I wasn't mentally capable of managing such a large fish.

Fear makes you weaker and your counterparty stronger.

The second one is the fear of not knowing what to do with success. We all want to catch a huge fish or execute a huge project, but we don't know what to do with it when it comes. Often, we are afraid of the success that we aim to achieve. I always ask my clients – What would you do with your success? We are good at fighting to the end when we know what we gain out of it and what could be done further.

However, if we realize that the success which is almost at our fingertips is too big, we lose control as our mind says “no” to it. Our mind is not prepared and we are often not prepared to lead this desired success.

Fear of success blocks us when we almost reach the desired success. Always know what to do with the success you aim to achieve. Otherwise, your mind will play against you.

Illusions cloud minds. They feed you with unrealistic expectations – good or bad. This happened to me with that first fish. In my mind, I was already weighing the fish when I should have been focused on landing it. The fish that is not in a bag can't be weighed and cooked. Something that wasn't executed can't be measured and is mere speculation.

Empty projection might feed your ambitions but wouldn't impress anyone with the outcome. Be realistic, not illusive.

Fear and illusion have big eyes. However, don't be afraid of the opportunities you were looking for or brag about illusive projections. Go, try, learn, and win. Your fears and illusions will disappear through the fights.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- In fishing, nature is the fairest and strictest arbiter of who wins and who loses. In leadership, the outcome will show whether you won or need to improve.
- Fear is a normal human reflex. Courage is a skill that can be developed. Courage is acting and thinking boldly in the face of something unexplored, huge, and complicated.
- Illusive projections make people stop and wait for success, taking it for granted. This is not forgivable in leadership. Illusions are for amateurs.
- What will you do with the success you aim to achieve? Be clear, otherwise, you won't achieve it.
- The greater your leadership abilities, the greater the confidence of your team to execute something big, and fear is diminished and becomes easily manageable.

TINY DEVILS

With the first small and gentle leaves appearing and the air warming up a bit, clouds of mosquitoes take control of the air. Regardless of the weather, in wind or rain, these tiny evils of the North are on the bloody hunt for every live creature in their way. Humans are their prime target.

Legions of these vampires are everywhere. They go into every tiny gap in the clothing, finding every bit of exposed flesh to sink their needles into.

You can't ignore mosquitoes. Once, I fell asleep by the campfire forgetting to spray mosquito repellent and woke up with bruises on my face looking like a boxer after a tough fight thanks to all the bites.

They can turn a person into a bundle of inflamed nerves. One of my in-laws, a big and strong guy, visited us and I took him for a two-day trip to show him nature and get him into fishing. In a matter of a few hours, he got an allergy shock and a fever, forcing us back home.

In the times of the Soviet Union, it was a torture-death in Gulag camps – putting someone naked on

mosquitoes. It was known as *komariki* (mosquitoes). This is an incredibly brutal and slow torture to death.

It's impossible to fight every insect. You have to find a way to protect yourself so you can move on with the day. You can use a mosquito net or use mosquito repellents. Repellents are effective and don't restrict your movements as mosquito nets do. Also, there is a belief that some kind of antibody against mosquito bites tends to develop every season allowing one to be more tolerant of the bites and use less repellent.

In simple terms, if you can't find a solution against mosquitoes, you simply can't continue fishing and enjoy nature.

In terms of leadership, all businesses face a myriad of problems that, like mosquitoes, suck blood and energy from them. Having problems is normal unless they turn into deadly challenges.

In personal or business life, we mainly hear people talk about problems. Many people proudly declare on their social media profiles and CVs that they are "problem-solvers." However, talking about problems only causes more problems.

Great leaders talk about solutions. We have enough problem-solvers; we need more solution-finders. The main challenge for today's businesses is the lack of vision that reflects long-term solutions for others.

Without a strong vision for the future, many leaders are not in a position to fight against today's problems. They think about problems only and not about the future, lacking a strong and compelling vision and the ability to tap into the future with confidence. Of course, the future doesn't send an email to anyone with clear plans. It demands a clear vision.

To win in the marketplace, your vision and goals must be greater than your problems. Vision is a multidimensional space in the future that reflects the value offered for others.

The greatness of a vision matters more than the size of the organization. Great vision allows organizations to grow and remain valuable for many years to come.

Without vision, a leader turns into a problem-solver or a mosquito fighter who doesn't have much chance to focus on creating the future.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Your vision must be greater than your problems.
- When your goals are greater than your problems, you change your mindset to achieve them.
When you don't have great goals, your problems determine your way of thinking.
- Limited thinking defines limited goals. A strong mindset defines goals that go beyond the ordinary.
- Problem-solving doesn't make anyone successful. Success is defined by the solutions found and executed.
- If your mindset is attuned to finding problems, you will find many more of them. If your mindset is attuned to finding solutions, you will find many brilliant solutions.

A CEO WITH A FLY ROD – KRIS KLEIN

Talking to someone who travels the world fishing whilst running the company that every fly fisherman respects greatly is something special.

Kris Klein is the CEO of Sage, a producer of the world's finest performance fly rods and reels. Kris fishes the world, not just travels it.

“Fishing in general, makes all of us more connected to the world. There is no greater or grander connection in the world than fishing. It is something that requires a lifelong pursuit to be good at it and it is extremely challenging.

This is an eternal pursuit of learning. I've spent time with some of the world's greatest anglers and each one of them still talks about things that they have to continue to learn and grow. I am the CEO of a world-renowned fly-fishing company and I feel like an amateur most days in what I'm doing.

This is life's purpose; to recognize that we are just very small pieces of a very large world. We have so much to continue to evolve and grow into and candidly, give back.

I remember standing in the Big Wood River which is a river outside Sun Valley, Idaho, and had a spectacular day of fishing. I was standing in the stream and looking over just off to my left, and there's this trout. Looking up at me, it came up, took a fly right off the surface, dove deep down, and looked back up at me and just kind of kept sitting right in that same feed line. I watched this fish for about 15 minutes and it was one of the most amazing connections that I've ever had.

I travel a lot, which provides the opportunity for one to get out and about and meet people all over the world, being able to experience the world's cultures and learn different life perspectives. There's so much variety and distinction between fishing in Alaska and spending time with people in Brazil when fishing there. When two anglers meet each other, they always have something to talk about. This is about fishing and how passionate they are regardless of what kind of fish they are chasing. This is a power of passion that bonds different people into one brotherhood.

Fishing is about giving back, to people and to the community. As a leader, one of my roles is to

inspire and grow others. Ultimately, I must be very good at sharing passion and pulling young people into the organization by teaching them how to learn and what to learn. This is one of the greatest gifts and joys, getting people to learn things and develop shared knowledge with others.

Fishing is about being able to understand and read circumstances and situations and infer from not only what you see but what you feel, and what you might be able to gather from others. Fishing is more about EQ than IQ.

Fishing is about patience. Patience makes you stop, listen, observe, and learn. It does set you up though, for the ability to look and see things holistically as opposed to specifically and keep your point. I think there are many technical aspects in the fly-fishing space, which means

I understand the grain weight of a line, I understand how many wraps are in a fly, and so on. Yet, fishing is about understanding how to spend time with people and understand what's going on in circumstances and how to pursue the situation. It may not be about this cast and maybe about the forecast ahead of being, that's what's important.

As a CEO, fishing taught me to be in pursuit of becoming better as a human, how to accelerate my ability to communicate with different people, have a holistic view of circumstances and events, develop my EQ, constantly learn and refresh my skillset, be comfortable being uncomfortable, stretch myself to be better, be resilient, remain authentic, and be grateful to people and the world.”

Thank you, Kris, for sharing your passion and wisdom.