



# **TAMING YOUR SEVEN CROCODILES**

**UNLEARN FEAR &  
BECOME A TRUE LEADER**

**Hylke Faber**

**"Withhold no sacrifice,  
begrudge no toil, seek  
no sordid gain, fear no  
foe, all will be well."**

**—Winston Churchill**

Are you about to take on an inspiring new role, and looking for inspiration? Or maybe you are looking for a change? Maybe you feel overwhelmed by your to-do-list? Or maybe you are looking to inspire your team to its next level of excellence? Whatever your question is, if you were to have lived twenty-five hundred years ago in ancient Greece you may have taken it to the Oracle at Delphi. You would have learned there to "know thyself." It was written on the entrance gate to the oracle.

I believe getting to know who we truly are is the core of effective leadership and living a fulfilling life today.

# Borrowed Group Thinking

Fast forward from ancient Greece to the sinking of the Titanic in the early morning of April 15, 1912. In the movie *Titanic*, we watch Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet's character) survive by holding onto a piece of driftwood. What can this tell us about the power of being our true selves?

The captain knows that his ship will go down in less than three hours and that there are too few lifeboats—to be precise, they have capacity for only 1,178 of the 2,224 people onboard. Yet he tragically follows procedure and instructs the disembarkation of the sinking ship using lifeboats only—first-class passengers, women, and children first. Seemingly no one, starting with the captain, manages to effectively challenge protocol, think for themselves, and find an unorthodox way to address the crisis. 1,514 people on the maiden voyage of the Titanic perish. The US inquiry following the disaster concludes that “those involved had followed standard practice, and the disaster could thus only be categorized as an ‘act of God.’”

What could have been a more effective response to the imminent demise of the great ship? There are many possibilities. Looking at Rose's example: “Make flotation devices with every piece of wood on this ship you can get your hands on,” may have been one idea that could have saved many.

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Why did no one challenge protocol effectively?

We can only speculate. People were in a panic. They may have thought it was how things were done, that there wasn't another way. That they should respect superiors, that it was hopeless anyway, impossible. That they didn't have the authority to change things. That people couldn't be trusted to make flotation devices themselves.

Does any of this group thinking sound familiar? When I look at myself and those I coach, I see that we seem to be hypnotized by unquestioned beliefs that keep us small, disconnected from each other and ourselves, and far less effective and innovative than we could be.

Where do these hypnotizing beliefs come from and what can we do about them?

Who do you look at first when you see a group picture with you in it? Yes, admit it, it's you. No wonder selfies are so popular. We are very interested in ourselves. We could judge ourselves for this, or we can see our innate interest in ourselves as an asset. What would become possible if we could use our fascination with ourselves to help ourselves and others to become free from unquestioned, limiting beliefs?

Taking a look inside of ourselves, we find a plethora of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs—often contradicting each other. We may conclude that these internal forces are based on unique, personal beliefs and experiences. They are not. They are based on “borrowed” beliefs—repetitive ways of interpreting the world we didn't come up with ourselves, but learned along the way—from family and other caregivers, teachers, colleagues, and others in our environment. Such borrowed beliefs may include: “I should be perfect to be loved,” “I should please others to belong,” “I should play small to stay safe,” “I should follow the rules,” “I should not make mistakes,” “I should be better than others,” and “I should know the answer.”

Why do we rely so much on these “borrowed beliefs,” even if they limit us?

# Tame Your Crocodiles

One clue lies in our nervous system. Its primary function is to help us survive. It's always on the alert for potential danger and wants to protect us at all cost. It's driven by fear, the fear of dying. While this is great for physical survival—for example, it helps us dodge an oncoming car in traffic by triggering an immediate reaction—it also limits us. The primitive part of our nervous system—we call it the crocodile—often gets it wrong. For example, the crocodile cannot discern between threats to our physical and emotional (ego) survival. Driven by fear, it sends us into a habitual fight/flight/freeze reaction, no matter what the perceived danger may be. It believes that an angry boss, difficult feedback, a disagreement, and a long to-do-list are the same as a tiger about to eat us for lunch.

That's the bad news. The good news is that we can work with these crocodiles. We tame them by naming them. Studying them, I found seven common crocodilian beliefs we revert to, to protect our ego. Each of these crocodiles is fueled by a specific fear derived from our core fear of dying, specifically the death of our ego. Also, these seven crocodiles are related to Maslow's hierarchy of needs: physiological, safety, social, esteem, self-actualization, and transcendence. As you read through the seven crocodiles below, maybe ask yourself which crocodilian belief you are most invested in and how it shows up in your behavior, especially under stress.

Which crocodile is most like you? You'll recognize we organized them with the acronym SUCCESS: Safe, Us vs. Them, Controlling, Certain, Essential, Sapient and Special.

**The Safe One.** If we are driven by a fear of scarcity, we believe we have to prioritize safety, financially and otherwise. To make that happen, we overwork and/or give up, blaming others and taking a victim stance. Also, we focus on the short term only to stay (emotionally) safe. We may believe that we can't trust we'll be provided for, that we have to be better than others and prioritize work over relationships.

**The Us vs. Them One.** Afraid of being abandoned, we create a clique around us. We make sure that people don't and can't leave us. We keep our tribe intact by judging anyone who thinks and acts differently and by making sure we are fitting in, complying with the tribal norms. At work, we create silos that ensure a pseudo-sense of belonging. We believe that we have to please to belong and judge others who don't.

**The Controlling One.** If we are afraid of failure, we will want to control the outcomes of everything, so failure is no longer an option. We have to be perfect. We control ourselves and others by fixing things, even when it's better to let the learning process play out. We force quick fixes. We manipulate others to do exactly what we want, as another way to control outcomes. And we create bureaucracies around us to micro-manage the greatest number of people as easily as possible. We believe we are more likely to get what we want and avoid failure when everyone, including ourselves, plays by our often intricate web of rules.

**The Certain One.** If uncertainty is our core fear, we will pursue certainty at all cost, being rigid in our behaviors and thinking. We hold on to our opinions and feelings as facts. Our heart is closed to uncertainty, and therefore the richness of this moment. We also keep ourselves and others tied up in emotional drama as a sure way to maintain the certain status quo. We may believe that we always need to have the right answer and that others who don't agree with us are just not getting it, or worse.

**The Essential One.** If we are afraid of hurt, making sure we are indispensable—essential—may be a good strategy, thinks the crocodile. Then we're sure we won't have to face the ultimate hurt—which, from this perspective, is rejection. We also try to avoid this hurt by making ourselves invisible while telling ourselves we are really important to the team. Rescuing others can be another great way to secure our place in the tribe forever, advises the crocodile, or just dominate others and become the boss, that way you'll really be indispensable! Or we do everything by ourselves. That way we never have to face the unpredictability of relationship.

**The Sapient One.** If we worry about complexity, we may find it comforting to believe that—in the end—we always have the answer. We are all-knowing, sapient. A great way to impress people with our knowledge is to paint doomsday scenarios, as people's crocodiles love to feed on this kind of drama (it keeps them on high alert, the crocodiles' favorite way to ensure survival). Since we know best, we also give people advice, often unasked.

**The Special One.** And lastly, if we are concerned about losing our identity, securing “special” status can be a great insurance policy. What is the premium we need to pay for this? Placing ourselves or others we are associated with on a pedestal does the job, and being a martyr who takes one for the team is a great strategy also. We may find ourselves in an ivory tower, seemingly protected from the riff-raff below us.

Which crocodile is most like you? And from whom did you learn your primary crocodilian beliefs? Was it from Mom? Dad? A sibling? A teacher? A colleague? A friend? For example, I grew up on a farm in post-World War II Netherlands, when economic survival was a core priority. Making mistakes, having low grades, and not being the best were unacceptable behaviors then, as they were believed to be threats to our family's survival. As a result, I let a significant part of my life be driven by the Controlling Crocodile, becoming a perfectionist and micro-managing others.

The good news is that we can work with these crocodiles. We tame them by naming them.

# Cultivate Your Owl

Fortunately, we have the capacity to tame our fearful crocodiles by being conscious of them. When we do so, we create space for the owl, the wiser and more courageous parts of our nervous system, to come online. The heart and our prefrontal cortices are core providers of owl energy and insight. Let's learn from Winston Churchill how.

Churchill was leading another Titanic-like, seemingly hopeless situation in May of 1940 when he became prime minister of Great Britain while the Nazis were quickly overrunning Europe. At the time, Britain's entire army was trapped by the Nazis and was days away from being destroyed on the coast of Normandy. Churchill's wartime cabinet felt compelled to follow the course set by Neville Chamberlain, and negotiate a peace agreement with Hitler to protect their country. Winston came close to giving in, very close in fact, as, for a while, he didn't see any other way to save the British people from impending destruction.

Then, as if struck by lightning, he came to see a different way and rallied. He transformed the fear of failure—being destroyed by the Nazis—and the belief in the desperate quick fix of appeasement into courage and purposefulness, invoking parliament and the British people to fight even it meant dying for the cause of liberty. Said Churchill: "An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last." In one of his first visible acts of leadership, called Operation Dynamo, he called on the British people to sail a flotilla of merchant marine boats, fishing boats, pleasure craft, yachts, and lifeboats across the channel and rescue the British troops. Of the 300,000 British soldiers, most of them were rescued, against all odds. This heroic evacuation came to be known as the Miracle at Dunkirk.

Churchill didn't give into fear-based group thinking. He transformed it into courage, resourcefulness, and purpose. Thankfully so, otherwise I for one would have likely grown-up in a Nazi-occupied territory (The Netherlands).

There is something magnetizing about Churchill and other people like him who visibly and actively transform their crocodiles into owls, acting more from their deepest truth, their true selves. Besides Churchill, think of others who inspire you. Maybe it's FDR who transformed the fear of a nation paralyzed by the Great Depression into the courage to rebuild? Or Mandela's resolve to transform hatred (driven by the fear of others) into reconciliation no matter what? Or maybe it's one of your friends or a family member who has outgrown some of his or her own crocodilian fears?

We can tame our crocodiles and bring them under the aegis of our authentic owls by naming our crocodiles, just like Churchill, and by being intentional about living more and more from our fearless, true selves—our owls.

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This may sound great and yet feel impossible, especially when we're under stress. It helps to have a few pointers to practice with. We call these Owl Intentions, to signify our innate courage, wisdom, and compassion. They are listed below. (You'll again recognize the acronym SUCCESS.)

**FROM: CROCODILIAN SUCCESS BELIEF    TO: OWL SUCCESS INTENTION**

- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| 1. Safe        | <i>Samurai</i> —having the warrior-like courage and fortitude to take care of my basic needs, and face my challenges resourcefully without being overwhelmed by them.               |
| 2. Us vs. Them | <i>Uniting</i> —creating authentic, empathic relationships that welcome everyone and go beyond tribal, us-vs.-them dynamics.  |
| 3. Controlling | <i>Centered in purpose</i> —being driven by my inner compass, pursuing my goals wholeheartedly and with focus, and seeing every "failure" as part of moving forward.                |
| 4. Certain     | <i>Curious</i> —opening my heart to life's teachings, "the whispers," no matter what, and seeing every moment as an opportunity for discovery, bigger vision, and being innovative. |
| 5. Essential   | <i>Extending My Contribution</i> —expressing my gift to others unapologetically and caringly.   |
| 6. Sapient     | <i>Sensing</i> —using intuition, looking for truth and the connection between everything and everyone, integrating the seeming polarities in life, creating cohesion.               |
| 7. Special     | <i>Simple</i> —seeing what is needed and doing it, letting go of ego personas, simply being and contributing who I am.  |

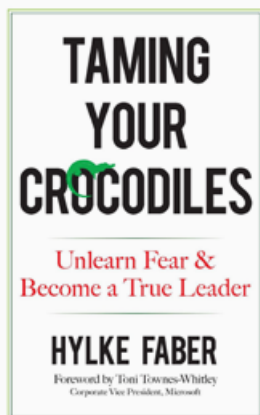
If you like, take a few minutes now for a crocodile taming practice. Look back at the summary above and pick one of the pairs that you are drawn to. Then, think about a challenge you are facing now. How would you approach it from your crocodile? And how could you approach it from your Owl SUCCESS Intention? If you think you need to stay stuck in old crocodilian ways, ask yourself, *Who is talking—the owl or the crocodile?*

Who wants to die having lived an inauthentic, fear-based life making weak, sheepish, or aggressive choices—limiting themselves and others, however unintentionally? We all, deep down, aspire to live our deepest truth. Our truth propels us beyond our fear-based beliefs. It connects us to our deep longing to courageously stand for freedom, love, and peace, no matter what. The more we connect with our true essence and stand for it, the more we experience the inspiration, power, and connection that comes with that commitment.

This stand is not an event. It's an ongoing practice, especially important when we lead others. As the song goes (slightly modified) "You always take your weather with you." Our energy impacts those around us. People who met Gandhi, FDR, and Mandela (foes and friends alike) tended to leave feeling bigger on the inside. We ourselves can have that effect on those we lead. **As we liberate ourselves from limiting beliefs we inspire others to do the same.** 🐢



# Info



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## About the author

Hylke Faber's mission is to realize his essence and help others do the same. He shares *Taming Your Crocodiles* to help all of us, including himself, take the next step in our endless journey to become more of who we truly are. He served as a Partner at Co-Creation Partners and Strategic Decisions Group and as a consultant at Axialent and Towers Perrin, supporting leaders across multiple industries globally on strategy, organization, and culture development programs. He teaches the "Leader as Coach" courses at Columbia Business School and has contributed to *Harvard Business Review*, including the article "What FDR Knew about Fear in Times of Change." He leads two coaching organizations, Constancee and the Growth Leaders Network, sings kirtan (East Indian meditative practice), loves the outdoors, and lives with his partner in Seattle, Washington.

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