

We Have Mastered Fire, Writing... What About Leadership?

Sensory Leadership · Elixar · sensoryleadership.org · Feb 2026

Think for a moment about a fireplace. Not as nostalgia. As locus and context.

For thousands of years, fire kept people close, gathered with a shared focal point. It offered warmth, protection, and light, yes. But it was also the place where the group found a shared exposure, and the premise of a language for navigating the world together. The fire did not make them friends as we conceive today. It made them present to one another.

Most organisations begin team development elsewhere. We often skip this first gathering entirely. Our 'efficient' mental models have led us to assume that a group of hired individuals — each carrying distinct histories, cognitive styles, and unspoken expectations — is already a team, because a profile assessment or an organisation chart says so. Next comes a flood of frameworks, KPIs, workshops, and social events. And the fire never quite ignites.

It is now time to talk about what we have quietly lost in the long civilisational march from the fire to the screen.

This article does not describe the full architecture of Sensory Leadership. Instead, it pauses on ignition. That is what determines whether everything that follows will be built on genuine ground or on polite compliance.

WHAT A 2,500 YEAR HINDSIGHT TELLS US

Coherent observations on temperament, instinct, and behavioural style predate Carl Jung's archetypes and William Moulton Marston's DISC model by two millennia.

In the era of Homeric epic poetry, around 800 BC, Greek culture was already encoding these differences into archetypal characters: Athena the strategist, Demeter the nurturer, Hestia the keeper of order, Calliope the source of inspiration. Around 444 BC, Empedocles went further: behaviour and mood are shaped not only by inner constitution but by the external environment — fire, water, earth, and air as codified forces acting on and through people. Hippocrates followed, around 400 BC, with the theory of internal fluids — choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic — a prescient foresight of what we now understand as hormonal influence on cognition and mood... Then

in the last decades, the DISC four quadrants and its variant imageries or rebranding (colours, birds, playing card suits...) have animated team-building seminars and Learning & Development forums.

A PATTERN OBSERVATION

The vocabulary changed across the centuries — muses, birds, hormone labels — but a pattern did form over time as two ruts:

1. Models are cognition friendly: often flatten on few archetypes or 4 quadrants for ease of scripture and verbal memorisation.
2. Models have shifted inward (medical science) and split away (rather than reconcile) the ecosystem view: Indeed, Hippocrates' internal fluids did not land as an add-on to Empedocles' external elements. It has overshadowed if not overwritten the former theory.

That said, across all these observations the consensus is that people carry different natural configurations, and those configurations matter enormously. The outside influence of environments is acknowledged but mostly kept as a side note.

Every generation needs a new language to make that ancient truth accessible. The language of Greek myth reached one era. But talking about Calliope and Athena would have raised eyebrows in a boardroom. So, the science-backed DISC model came along and covered these last decades with an analytic narrative fitting nicely the minds of our “data-age”.

These foundational frameworks have and will help us leaping forward. Critical thinking must nonetheless take us beyond the framing of such archetypes.

Our current era — visually saturated, digitally mediated, physically distanced — is a new deal requiring a re-boot of self-knowledge and mutual recognition.

THE THINKERS WHO PUT OUT THE FIRE

To continue unpacking the basis we stand on, let's be humble for a minute and admit that we have all been seduced by the “intellectual excellence” parade which may have sounded like this:

After all, intellect got us here: smart and tidy, drinking coffee and wearing a tweed suit. Right? We are surely looking much sharper than those ancestors hanging out in caves and roasting mammoth at the full moon. Isn't it true?

With such undeniable backing evidence of the goods of “intellectual excellence”, no wonder that the most influential minds of the last three centuries were inclined to marginalise the sense of smell and to wash away anything cognition could not fully compute:

Immanuel Kant (1798) called olfaction the "most ungrateful" and "most dispensable" of the senses — too subjective, too proximate, too animal. Hegel eliminated it entirely from his aesthetics: smell, in his framework, could not rise to the level of genuine cognition. Darwin (1874) concluded it was "of extremely slight service" to humankind — a vestige of our evolutionary past, no longer needed. Freud went furthest of all: he argued that the sublimation of smell — its deliberate suppression — was itself a factor of civilisation. In Freud's architecture, the civilised human being was the one who had successfully put distance between himself and his olfactory instincts.

Four intellectual pillars have then pressed the human organisation firmly toward the rational, the visual, the textual — and firmly away from the sensory, the proximate, the instinctive. Their legacy did not stay in philosophy. It walked into every boardroom, every L&D curriculum, every performance review template we have built since.

Neuroscience brings another light: Olfaction is the sense most directly wired to the brain's centres of emotion and memory, requiring only two synapses to reach the amygdala and hippocampus — routes that vision and hearing cannot match. We can't choose to suppress olfaction unless we stop breathing. So, it fires up anyway and it will beat all cognition-driven processes, both on the sprint (emotion) and on the marathon (memory). Ignoring this super neuro-power would make us the new primitive.

When our tool was a sharp stone on a stick, our best interest was to grow as the Homo Sapiens. Since we swapped the tool for AI, we'd be better skilling-over as the Homo Sentiens.

The formulation — Homo Sentiens — belongs to Max Tegmark, physicist and AI researcher at MIT.

As artificial intelligence assumes more of the cognitive load that previously defined the human competitive advantage, what remains irreplaceable is the capacity to feel, to perceive with the whole body, to read what has not been written.

An upgrade of rationality is needed.

A STRATEGY REMARK

It is crucial to outline — also by respect for the great minds who preceded us — that this *upgrade of rationality* is possible now but would have been a paralysing challenge before.

Why? Because of bandwidth. Indeed, Hippocrates and Hegel had nowhere near the advanced data-handling tools, neuroscience, and technology we all have access today. Hence the formation of the two ruts we mentioned prior — that is, *flatten reality to a few compressed dimensions* and *focus only on one judicious angle of perspective*. Such trade-offs (rationalisations) were a valid strategic choice in consideration of the bottlenecks (constraints), social codes (culture) and current state-of-the-art (context) of their time.

The conditions that created the ruts no longer exist. The implicit strategy of these thinkers has worked — it did move our civilisation forward. But the bottlenecks have now shifted elsewhere, and the ruts are getting dangerously deep.

Today we have an opportunity to de-polarise and enrich the approach. Let's make sure we don't allow the opposite to happen.

The Sensory Leadership programmes are deliberately re-stimulating our ability to sense. It is not a retreat from rationality (*nor a new hippy movement*). It is the prelude and upgrade that rationality currently needs.

THE PERFUME AS AN ACCELERATOR

Per fumum: through smoke. The word perfume was born at the fire.

The first act of human perfumery was not aesthetic decoration — it was communal signal. That etymology matters not as poetry but as instruction: the olfactory channel is one of the primary instruments of human synchronisation.

This is the context in which Elixar designed the 4 QOAZ perfumes — not as a creative flourish, and not as a workshop activity, but as a deliberate instrument for expanding the perceptual bandwidth of human self-knowledge and mutual recognition. The four perfumes — Qelia™, Olfimé™, Alkyres™, and Zahemi™ — each carry a distinct signature: encoding configurations of the attributes that Empedocles (the outer tensions) and Hippocrates (the inner tensions), mapped across their own eras. This is a language the body receives before the mind can classify it.

David Weinberger observed that knowledge has never been a mirror of reality — it has always been the shape of its container. The dominant containers of human self-knowledge have been words and visual symbols: written descriptions, quadrant diagrams, assessment reports, personality labels.

These containers are powerful. They are also limited. They tend to produce oppositions: I am this, therefore not that. Categories that fix rather than illuminate.

The olfactory container works differently. The response is immediate and personal. And when a perfume lands on skin — the interface between the interior world and the exterior world, between Hippocrates' internal chemistry and Empedocles' external forces — it expresses itself differently on each person, modulated by the unique chemistry of that individual's body.

This is not metaphor. It is biochemistry.

When verbal descriptions of temperament are placed side by side, they tend to oppose each other. When olfactory notes are combined, they create alliances.

Words polarise. Scents compose. Starting with scents activates a more open cognitive architecture and greatly accelerates mutual recognition that words rarely achieve at first encounter. In a half-day OlfaTeam™ session, teams regularly report a quality of mutual recognition that unstructured interaction rarely produces in less than three months.

BUILDING THE CONDITIONS FOR RECEPTION

Robert Zarader, the French strategic communication advisor, offers a principle that is operationally radical: communication is not the transmission of content. It is the construction of the conditions under which content can be received. The trust architecture must exist before the message can travel. Without it, even the most precisely formulated strategy lands in a relational vacuum. The opening phase of Sensory Leadership is precisely this construction.

At the start of Sensagy™ and OlfaTeam™ programmes, the perfumes are not an accessory. They are literally on participants' skin, present as a companion for the journey ahead — sensed before each session begins, underlying throughout. They are the fire around which the Sensory Tribe first assembles: a shared context that does not require consensus, does not produce opposition, and does not demand that anyone perform a version of themselves they have not yet chosen.

Each participant will find themselves drawn to one of the four perfumes at the outset. This is informative. It is not final. Elixir does not stop at archetype identification — that would simply repeat the limitation of every classification system that preceded it.

The initial perfume resonance is a starting orientation, not a verdict. Over the course of the programme, participants come to recognise that all four configurations do exist within them. The question is not who you are — but which capacity the Sensory Tribe needs from you in each situation and how others can support you.

The “Sensory Tribe” is not primitive, it is present. That is the re-boot teams need. And it happens after re-igniting the fire...

Mel Robbins, drawing on research from MIT, confirms three conditions for genuine human connection to form: proximity, timing, and energy (i.e. common focal attention) — this is, in effect, the moment we get back together around the fire.

Only now, are emerging the conditions to operate at what Jean-Luc Godard calls “the margin that holds the page” — that is, daring to leave the established centre to reach the seemingly barren edge where the cradle of meaning and creativity rests.

Only now, we tackle challenges that are not technical but adaptive and most consequential. Heifetz and Linsky observe that people have then to change how they see the situation before they can change what they do about it.

Only now, we can hear the warning of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who named the danger of the single story: that is, the moment when one narrative absorbs the full complexity of a person or a situation.

ONLY NOW, THE REAL JOURNEY BEGINS

This article has described the reason for the systematic sensorial opening phase of Sensory Leadership — the structured discovery of who the *Sensory Tribe* is, what drives each of its members, and what relational architecture is needed for genuine trust to form.

It is not the full programme. What follows — the management frameworks, the adaptive leadership tools, the strategic convergence practices described in our [previous article](#) — requires this foundation to function at full depth.

Elixir does not theorise about human potential. It creates the conditions under which it unlocks. Starting this way is not a soft preference. It is a business survival ritual.

Without it, those subsequent modules risk becoming what most L&D programmes already are: technically coherent, humanly thin, and forgotten within a quarter.

IN BRIEF

The fundamentals of human nature have not changed in 2,500 years. What changes, in every era, is the language needed to make those fundamentals accessible, receivable, and actionable. From Greek muses to DISC quadrants — each was a container designed for its moment. For an age of screens and physical distance, a new container conducive to the recovery of proximity, presence, and multisensory depth is no longer a cultural preference but a business necessity.

If you recognise your organisation in any of these elements — the next step is a conversation.

Discover the full framework at sensoryleadership.org · Contact Elixar at projects@elixar.eu

#SensoryLeadership #SensoryTribe #HomoSentiens #TeamDevelopment #FutureOfWork #Olfaction #OrganisationalCulture

About the Elixar services

Elixar is the sole provider of comprehensive Sensory Leadership programmes — delivered in-presence, anywhere in the world, in English, French, and Italian. Programmes range from the full Sensagy™ journey (24 hours, six modules, from sensory awareness to strategic direction) to the focused OlfaTeam™ format (10 hours, five modules, anchored in olfactory practice and project management application) to keynotes and half-day interventions in retreats and seminars.

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About the Founder of Elixar

Jeremy Leroux is a Managing Director and strategic advisor (Cert. MCI, California) with more than twenty years of international leadership experience in B2B industries spanning beverages, food ingredients, and pharmaceutical applications to then delve into the world of perfumes (Cert. Olfactive Design, Politecnico di Milano). Having lived and worked across France, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and Italy, he graduated in France as an Engineer and MSc in Food Processes and obtained an MBA in California. He founded Elixar on the conviction that sensory experience is and will be a foundation for the performance of humans and businesses.

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