

# GOLDILOCKS, PORCUPINES, AND CHAMELEONS, PART 3: THE CHAMELEON LEADER

Now that we have discussed “The Goldilocks Zone” (the “just right” leadership relationship of effective leaders, and porcupine leaders (prickly, unapproachable, defensive leaders), we are finally able to reveal the chameleon leader. You may remember our earlier discussions on leadership in relation to outer rings and inner cores. Our inner core is home to an unchanging set of

timeless priceless,  
core beliefs,  
enduring values,  
deep convictions  
and non-negotiable commitments,

and the outer ring is more fluid, able to adapt to new situations. A wise leader exercises wisdom and discernment in the process of leading effectively through their inner core and outer ring. But what happens when a leader’s outer ring dominates the inner core? You guessed it. This result is the chameleon leader.

## THE CHAMELEON.

The chameleon is a small lizard. About half of the eighty-nine species of chameleons live in Madagascar, with the rest living in sub-Saharan Africa. Of course the chameleon is best known for its vivid and dramatic changes of color. While chameleons can’t display a limitless range of colors, they do exhibit a wide range of color displays, including green, blue, yellow, brown, red, black or white. Contrary to popular notions, the chameleon does not change color in response to its immediate surroundings. Rather, its color changes are evoked by stimuli such as levels of light, variations in temperature and even variations in the chameleon’s mood and emotion—yes, I guess lizards have emotions, too. For instance, a calm chameleon may exhibit green. An angry chameleon may exhibit yellow. Color changes also communicate important information from chameleon to chameleon, such as, “I’m in the mood to mate.

## THE CHAMELEON LEADER

When we refer to someone as a chameleon, we are not applauding the individual for his or her ability to constructively adapt to changing situations. Rather, when we refer to a chameleon leader, we mean that they are a person who is:

- inconsistent
- able to quickly adjust his attitudes and behaviors to reflect the current situation
- changing at the expense of his own beliefs
- making decisions at the expense of his own values
- does not follow his own convictions, or may not have convictions

We mean that they are flexible to a fault and make inappropriate accommodations to the people and circumstances around them.

Of course, this is not a compliment—no offense to the chameleon.

What is going on here?

### **THE CHAMELEON LEADER POSSESSES AN OUTER RING SO LARGE AND DOMINANT THAT IT SWALLOWS UP THEIR INNER CORE RESULTING IN AN “INTEGRITY GAP.”**

What the chameleon says and does, what he or she highlights, emphasizes, even believes and holds dear yesterday might be different from today and tomorrow. What is the rationale for these adjustments? Since the people or situation has changed and is constantly changing, so reasons the chameleon, so should their response. According to the chameleon, they are simply making a constructive attempt to stay connected and relevant to a changing world and the people in it.

### **IF WE DIDN'T KNOW BETTER, WE MIGHT THINK THE CHAMELEON IS A WISE AND DISCERNING PERSON.**

This would be a fitting description if, and if is the operative word, the chameleon's flexible response to the necessities of the moment remained vitally connected to his or her inner core, such that their attitudes, decisions and actions were a timely application of timeless principles, a contextualized expression of a core value. In fact, the chameleon's repertoire of responses is not shaped or informed by their inner core, but by the shifting demands of the context, the exigencies of a given situation, or at times, perhaps the expectations of others. The chameleon response is not an “effective flexibility” born of wisdom and insight. In some cases, the chameleon's seemingly apt response to changing circumstance is an expression of expedience, as in “It's just the easy thing to do given the givens.” In other cases the chameleon may be motivated by the expectations of others, reasoning, “I have to go along to get along.” And in some cases, the chameleon just wants to reserve the right to change his or her mind.

### **EITHER WAY, THE CHAMELEON'S OUTER RING HAS TAKEN ON A LIFE OF ITS OWN SHAPED EXCLUSIVELY BY CONTEXT NOT CONVICTION, AND FUNCTIONS—OR SHOULD WE SAY, MALFUNCTIONS—WITHOUT REFERENCE TO TIMELESS PRINCIPLES OR ENDURING VALUES**

Check back with us as we finish our series on Goldilocks, Porcupines and Chameleons.

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