

MODERN IMPACT PRESS

QUALIFIED, **BUT NOT** RECOMMENDED

BECOMING UNCOMMON:
A PERSONAL REFLECTION
ON LEADERSHIP, IDENTITY,
AND IMPACT



LEAH DOZIER WALKER

OCTOBER 2026

| MODERNIMPACTSOLUTIONS.ORG

A PERSONAL ESSAY

QUALIFIED, BUT NOT RECOMMENDED

Becoming Uncommon: A Personal Reflection on Leadership, Identity, and Impact

BY LEAH DOZIER WALKER

I am a Black woman who grew up “wealth adjacent.”

My childhood unfolded in Orange County, California, one of the wealthiest communities in the country, where my family experienced both the privileges of a middle-class lifestyle and the profound instability of financial hardship. I grew up in predominantly white communities and attended exceptionally well-resourced public schools whose opportunities would profoundly shape the trajectory of my life. I also experienced racism, economic instability, and the uncertainty of not always knowing where we would call home. Those realities were not separate chapters of my childhood. They existed alongside one another, shaping my earliest understanding of opportunity and belonging.

When I was four years old, neighbors threw rocks into our yard and shouted racial slurs because my parents were an interracial couple. My father, a Marine and Vietnam veteran who had served his country, found

himself sitting in our front yard with a shotgun to protect his family from the very real threats of racial hostility. Years later, while working as a caseworker in a congressional office, helping veterans navigate the process of accessing the benefits they had earned through their military service, I began to recognize the painful contradiction in my father's experience: a man who had served his country was compelled to defend his own family against racial hatred in the very community they called home. Long before I had the language to describe structural racism, I was learning that the promises of freedom, opportunity, and belonging were not experienced equally by everyone.

Following my parents' divorce, the stability of our middle-class life gave way to years of financial hardship. My siblings and I experienced significant upheaval, and my mother and I lived in a motel for several years. We were, by any definition, unhoused. Yet throughout that

period, I continued attending schools in communities where educational resources, academic expectations, and pathways to opportunity were abundant. I never had a Black teacher. I was frequently one of very few Black students in my classrooms. I experienced the isolation and indignities that come with being different in spaces where difference is neither understood nor embraced. I also benefited from schools exceptionally well equipped to prepare their students for success.

I did not fully appreciate the significance of that contradiction until much later. As a child, I understood the instability of my circumstances and the discomfort of navigating predominantly white spaces. What I could not yet recognize was how profoundly the resources and expectations surrounding me were shaping my future. I knew what it meant to experience economic hardship, but I did not grow up in a community defined by concentrated, intergenerational poverty.

My access to educational opportunity remained remarkably consistent even when nearly everything else in my life was uncertain. That distinction would eventually become central to how I understood the relationship between individual circumstances and institutional outcomes. **I would spend much of my adult life making sense of those contradictions, returning again and again to the experiences of that little girl as I discovered the kind of leader I wanted to become.**

CALL ENDED.

Some of my earliest lessons about that responsibility came while I was a young legislative assistant in that same congressional district office. Fresh out of college

Leaving California to attend a historically Black college in Virginia introduced an entirely different dimension to my understanding of identity, opportunity and belonging. For the first time, I was immersed in an educational environment where Black history, culture, scholarship, and achievement were not peripheral to the experience but central to it. I encountered a richness of Black intellectual and cultural life that had been largely absent from my earlier education. At the same time, for the first time in my life, living in Virginia required me to confront the enduring legacy of Southern history and the ways race continued to shape communities and expectations. It was a profound transition, one that expanded my understanding of what it meant to be a Black woman in America and deepened my commitment to justice and opportunity.

I studied political science and later earned a master's degree in public administration, drawn to the relationship between government and the lives of the people it serves. I believed deeply that public policy and good leadership could improve lives, and that change required people willing to challenge established practices and advocate for those whose experiences were too often overlooked. What I had not yet considered was how much the character of the leader, and the choices that leader made when competing interests collided, would determine whether the pursuit of change stayed faithful to its purpose.

and still a graduate student, I was finding my footing as a professional and learning what public service demanded.

I remember it so clearly: my first angry constituent call. The nerves, the anxiety rising in my body as I listened to the caller, who had a bone to pick with the Congressman. They wanted the Congressman to change his position on a widely supported presidential initiative. I could hear the emotion and entitlement in their words, particularly when they made a point of mentioning that they had contributed to the Congressman's campaign. The implication was unmistakable: their financial support ought to influence the Congressman's vote. I felt unsettled and uncertain about how to respond to the suggestion that a contribution should produce a special kind of consideration from an elected representative.

Sometime later, the Congressman arrived at the district office I was headquartered in. In his easy way, he asked "How's it going?" Clumsily, I told him about the call, including the constituent's reference to his campaign contribution.

His reaction was immediate and indignant.

Disagreement did not offend him; it was part of public service. What he found unacceptable was the suggestion that a campaign contribution entitled a donor to

influence a legislative decision. Right then and there, he contacted his campaign office and directed his political staff to return the contribution. I was surprised by the decisiveness of his response. There was no visible calculation about the political value of keeping the donor or the money.

I admired the clarity of his decision, and I felt proud to be part of that team. I had no idea how much money was involved. It could have been hundreds of dollars or thousands. It didn't really matter. As a young Black woman beginning my professional life in politics, I was watching a leader with real power demonstrate that his principles were not negotiable.

The roots of my professional ethics were planted in that moment. I saw that public service could be guided by conviction rather than convenience, and that authority did not have to be surrendered to those with the greatest influence or resources. This moment began to shape my standard for leadership: know what you believe, know what you will not compromise, and let those commitments govern your choices when interests collide.

ON PRINCIPLE

KNOW WHAT YOU BELIEVE, KNOW WHAT YOU WILL NOT COMPROMISE, AND LET THOSE COMMITMENTS GOVERN YOUR CHOICES WHEN INTERESTS COLLIDE.

That lesson stayed with me as my career moved through advocacy, public policy, government, education, non-profit leadership, and organizational change. I remained convinced that the systems and organizations we build should open pathways to opportunity rather than rein-

force barriers. But I would come to see that knowing what we stand for and knowing how to achieve change are related, yet distinct. Conviction provides direction. It does not, by itself, equip us to navigate the complexity between aspiration and their realization.

I ONCE WAS BLIND...

My understanding of systems and of leadership's role in changing them shifted during my years working in education policy in Virginia. I had studied the historical and structural dimensions of inequity. I understood how discrimination could become embedded in institutions and persist across generations. But I had not fully appreciated the sophistication with which systems could be deliberately designed to produce outcomes. **Nor had I fully understood how a system's design, rules, and ordinary mechanisms could make certain outcomes predictable, even when no single person intended them.**

One of the most consequential revelations came as we examined the relationship between early identification for gifted education and access to Virginia's highly selective Governor's Schools. We wanted to understand why Black and Hispanic students remained so significantly underrepresented in these advanced academic opportunities. That inquiry led me to the history of gifted education in Charlottesville, where [research by Margaret Thornton](#) documents how the city's gifted program, created in the years after school desegregation, helped preserve racial separation in schools that were legally integrated, and where [ProPublica](#) and [The New York Times](#) later documented the disparities that followed. Gifted identification could determine which students gained access to advanced curricula, specialized

instruction, and opportunities that were not equally available to their peers. A school could be integrated in its enrollment while remaining deeply segregated in the opportunities it provided.

There are moments in your career, if you are fortunate, when your professional understanding collides with your lived experience. This was one of those moments for me. This work gave me language for experiences I had carried since childhood but had not yet fully understood.

As a young Black girl attending overwhelmingly white schools in Southern California, I was repeatedly identified as academically advanced and simultaneously treated as a behavioral problem. I remember being sent outside to sit at picnic tables because I laughed too loudly or distracted classmates after finishing my work.

In second grade, having already mastered the mathematics being taught, I was told I would spend the year helping other students rather than receiving more challenging instruction. Beginning in third grade, my standardized test scores repeatedly triggered assessments for California's Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program. Yet despite achieving qualifying scores in third, fourth, and fifth grades, I was never placed in the program because I lacked the required teacher recommendation.

Eventually, my mother demanded an explanation. A white single mother raising a Black daughter while struggling to keep a roof over our heads, she had neither the financial resources nor the institutional influence to challenge the school district. But she challenged it anyway, threatening legal action if I continued to be denied access. I have often wondered whether her identity as a white woman gave her a degree of credibility that a Black parent in similar circumstances might not have received. Whatever the explanation, her intervention changed my educational trajectory. By middle school, I was enrolled in honors and gifted-level courses, placing me on an academic pathway that would ultimately prepare me for college.

Decades later, examining the policies and practices governing access to gifted education in Virginia, I understood my childhood experiences through an entirely different lens. I could see that the issue was larger than the decisions of individual educators. **The system itself had been structured to give those**

decisions the power to determine which children received access to academic rigor and which did not. What I had experienced as a child was not simply a failure of individual judgment, but the consequences of an institutional design that allowed subjective assessments to shape educational opportunity.

The connection to my work in education public policy was central. Virginia's regulations require each school division to establish uniform procedures for identifying and serving gifted students while leaving local systems substantial discretion over how those procedures operate. Individual judgment mattered, but the system determined how much power that judgment carried. In my own childhood, the lack of a teacher's recommendation could override repeated evidence of readiness because the process was designed to allow it. Once I understood that structure, I could see how systems preserve patterns of advantage and disadvantage without requiring every person inside them to intend those outcomes.

ON SYSTEMS

IN MY OWN CHILDHOOD, THE LACK OF A TEACHER'S RECOMMENDATION COULD OVERRIDE REPEATED EVIDENCE OF READINESS BECAUSE THE PROCESS WAS DESIGNED TO ALLOW IT.

That realization changed how I understood lasting impact. If design and mechanisms shape outcomes, then changing those outcomes requires more than per-

suasion or public calls for reform. It requires understanding how authority, policy, regulation, accountability, resources, and daily practice work

together, then using those same levers to create different possibilities. My advisory practice is built on that understanding. I help leaders see the systems they are

operating within and successfully leverage them so that change is not merely announced, but embedded deeply enough to last.

... NOW I SEE

The implications reached far beyond education. Every organization runs on decisions, incentives, relationships, and rules, some written and some not. A compelling vision may begin the work, but lasting change depends on translating that vision into policies, resources, capabilities, and practices. I became more attentive to the difference between announcing change and making it last, and between winning support for an idea and building the capacity to carry it out. Much of that progress happens far from the spotlight: reading regulations, understanding budgets, navigating competing interests, and aligning decisions with purpose. The changes that endure are woven into daily operations so thoroughly that they no longer depend on the person who started them.

I also came to appreciate the tension between demanding change and accepting responsibility for leading within the places we hope to change. Urgency does not always fit neatly with the realities of governing or managing. People bring competing priorities, deeply held beliefs, legitimate concerns, and different levels of readiness. Leadership means taking those realities seriously without allowing them to become excuses for inaction. It requires judgment, relationships, and discernment about when to challenge, negotiate, build consensus, or hold firm.

As my understanding of systems grew, I kept returning to the question the Congressman's example left me with: whose donation am I willing to return? What am

I prepared to risk, relinquish, or refuse to remain faithful to the values that guide my leadership? The circumstances are rarely as clear as returning a campaign contribution. Sometimes the boundary is a matter of principle. At other times, discernment means declining an attractive, fully funded opportunity because it would distract from the organization's purpose, scatter its capacity, or displace work it is uniquely positioned to do. Strategy is not only a decision about what to pursue. It is also the discipline to decide what not to do, even when the opportunity is appealing and the resources are available.

Uncommon Leaders don't simply believe change is possible. They help others develop the confidence, capacity, and commitment to make it possible.

This responsibility becomes especially important when confronting deeply entrenched systems and seemingly insurmountable challenges. The complexity can feel overwhelming, often because it genuinely is. I often find myself reminding the leaders I work with that **just because something is hard doesn't mean we shouldn't attempt to do it.**

Throughout history, human progress has depended on our willingness to confront challenges that once seemed insurmountable. We have built civilizations, developed extraordinary technologies, and accomplished things that previous generations could scarcely have imagined. Our capacity to learn, adapt, innovate, and overcome obstacles is remarkable. The fact that

something is difficult does not make it impossible, nor does it diminish the importance of trying. Indeed, some of the most consequential advances in human history began with people who refused to accept that the limits of their present circumstances defined what was possible.

This is not hope as passive optimism or the belief that circumstances will somehow improve because our intentions are good. The kind of hope I am describing is a **disciplined commitment to possibility**, grounded in the understanding that the future is not

predetermined and that the conditions shaping our present reality can be changed. It requires leaders to translate their understanding into a credible vision for progress, to build confidence in the people they lead, and to demonstrate through their decisions and actions that meaningful change is achievable. Hope and confidence reinforce one another, giving people both a reason to believe in the mission and the conviction to pursue it, even when the challenges are complex, resistance is significant, and the path forward remains uncertain.

ON HOPE

HOPE IS NOT THE ALTERNATIVE TO STRATEGY. IT IS WHAT GIVES STRATEGY ITS PURPOSE AND STAYING POWER.



NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE

Not long ago, during a conversation with a leader I advise, I experienced a revelation that brought my personal history and professional understanding of systems into sharper focus. He described himself as an “exception story.” He reflected on the circumstances of his upbringing and the expectations that had surrounded him. By those expectations, he explained, his life was far more likely to have led to incarceration, addiction, or an early death than to the success he has achieved.

As he spoke, something clicked. I began thinking about my own childhood, the poverty, housing instability, racism, and uncertainty I had experienced, and the opportunities that had existed alongside those challenges. I realized that despite everything I had endured, my trajectory was remarkably consistent with the outcomes the schools I attended were structured and resourced to produce. I went to college. I earned an advanced degree. I built a successful career.

I had long understood my story through the lens of overcoming adversity, but in that moment I recognized something different. I was not an exception to the system. I am the product it was designed to produce. Given the schools, community supports, resources,

opportunities, and access available to me as a child growing up amongst the affluence of Orange County, California, I was supposed to end up exactly where I now find myself.

ON OPPORTUNITY

I WAS NOT AN EXCEPTION TO THE SYSTEM. I AM THE PRODUCT IT WAS DESIGNED TO PRODUCE.

I shared that realization with him, and we were both struck by the contrast. Here were two people who had navigated significant challenges and achieved professional success, yet whose journeys revealed very different relationships between individual circumstances and opportunity. His story showed what a person can accomplish despite the expectations surrounding him. Mine showed how access to opportunity can remain consequential even amid profound hardship. Neither diminished the other, and neither story alone explains everything. Determination, talent, and personal responsibility matter. So do the conditions in which those qualities are developed, recognized, supported, and rewarded. If we want different outcomes, we must be willing to examine and change those conditions.

For all the education I have received, the institutions I have served, and the professional experiences that have shaped my understanding of leadership, the deepest source of meaning in my work remains the little girl I once was. The little girl who sat outside her classroom

because her teachers saw a behavioral problem rather than an unmet academic need. Who lived in a motel while attending schools surrounded by extraordinary wealth and opportunity. Who experienced racism, economic hardship, and exclusion, yet also benefited from educational opportunities that would profoundly shape her future.

I often think about what might have been different for her. What if the adults entrusted with her education had recognized her potential rather than focusing on her behavior? What if access to opportunity had depended less on the discretion of individual educators? What if the circumstances of her family had not made something as fundamental as stable housing so difficult to achieve? I cannot change those experiences, but I can carry them into the rooms where decisions are made, where strategies are developed, and where institutions determine how they will use their resources and influence.



LITTLE LEAH IS MY NORTH STAR.

She reminds me that behind every policy, every strategic decision, and every organizational priority are people whose lives may be profoundly affected by choices they have little power to influence. And she reminds me that the purpose of understanding systems is not simply to explain the outcomes they produce, but to use that understanding to create different possibilities for the people whose lives they shape.

A STAR IS BORN

Over time, what began as a deeply personal understanding of injustice evolved into a clearer sense of purpose, a more deliberate approach to leadership, and ultimately, a philosophy for creating the kind of change I had spent

much of my life seeking to understand. This is at the heart of what I have come to call Modern Impact: a way of pursuing change that joins purpose and intention with the discipline required to make progress last.

Modern Impact defines the kind of change worth pursuing. It begins with the belief that how we create change is just as important as what we achieve. Uncommon Leadership is the practice through which meaningful, measurable, sustainable, people-centered, and transformative change becomes possible.

Modern Impact describes the change we seek. It asks us to look beyond immediate accomplishments and consider whether our decisions create opportunity, strengthen the organizations and communities we serve, improve lives, and produce outcomes that last. Uncommon Leadership concerns the practices and choices through which that change becomes possible. Results matter, as do our methods, the relationships we cultivate, and the consequences of our decisions for the people entrusted to our care.

We often celebrate leadership through individual achievement: the visionary executive, the bold decision, the successful initiative. These deserve recognition, but they do not tell us whether the conditions shaping peo-

ple's lives have improved, or whether progress will survive the departure of the leader who championed it. Modern Impact asks what remains after the applause has faded, the initiative has ended, or the leader has moved on. Is the organization stronger? Are its people better equipped to succeed? Have the possibilities available to those it serves meaningfully expanded?

Uncommon Leadership, as I have come to understand and practice it, is not a claim of exceptional ability, infallibility, or moral superiority. It is an intentional practice. It asks us to examine the relationship between our values, decisions, actions, and consequences; to act on conviction; to navigate complexity with humility; and to translate purpose into meaningful results.

BECOMING UNCOMMON

I have not always gotten this right. My leadership journey includes difficult decisions, imperfect judgments, and experiences that challenged both my confidence and my convictions. I have had to learn when persistence serves a purpose and when it prevents me from seeing another path. I have had to reconcile my instinct to challenge injustice with the patience required to navigate complexity, and to accept that certainty about the change we seek does not mean we yet possess the knowledge, relationships, or capabilities to achieve it.

Those experiences have made my commitment to meaningful change more deliberate. Leadership continually tests how faithfully and effectively we translate belief into action. Sometimes that means standing firm. Sometimes it means reconsidering a failing strategy, listening to perspectives we would rather dismiss, or acknowledging that our understanding is incomplete. Authority is not the same as wisdom, and the ability to achieve an outcome does not make that outcome worthy of pursuit.

I have come to understand leadership as a continuous process of becoming. The person I am today was shaped by the child I once was, the institutions that opened doors for me, the inequities I witnessed, the people who challenged my assumptions, and the responsibilities I have carried. I can trace that evolution from a young girl trying to make sense of contradictions she could not yet name, to a young professional discovering principled leadership, to a public servant learning

how systems work, and now to a strategic adviser helping leaders navigate complexity and pursue lasting impact.

Writing *Modern Impact: Uncommon Leaders* has extended that process. The book does not assert that I have mastered leadership or arrived at a final destination. It is an invitation to lead with greater intentionality, examine the consequences of our choices, and recognize what becomes possible when purpose is matched by disciplined practice.

As I approach my fiftieth birthday and prepare to share this work publicly on November 1, 2026, I find myself thinking about the distance between the little girl in Orange County and the woman I have become. Little Leah is my North Star. She reminds me what it feels like when ability is visible but access still depends on someone else's discretion, and how consequential it is when a parent refuses to accept that result. She also reminds me that the same educational system that constrained opportunity in one moment provided resources, expectations, and pathways that profoundly expanded my life. I do this work for her, and for the people whose futures are shaped by decisions made in rooms they may never enter.

I am still becoming the leader I aspire to be. I suspect I always will be. That is what I hope readers will carry from this book: Uncommon Leadership is a practice available to those willing to lead with intention, remain anchored in their values, and accept responsibility for both the results they achieve and the conditions they leave behind.

ON IMPACT

**BECAUSE THE MEASURE OF OUR
LEADERSHIP IS NOT SIMPLY WHAT
WE ACCOMPLISH WHILE WE ARE IN
THE ROOM.**

**IT IS WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE
BECAUSE WE WERE THERE.**

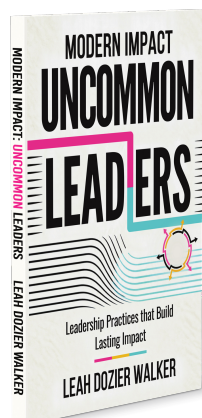


ABOUT THE AUTHOR



LEAH DOZIER WALKER

Leah Dozier Walker is an author, strategic advisor, and leadership practitioner whose work explores how leaders create meaningful, lasting change. She is the founder and principal consultant of Modern Impact Solutions, where she advises executives, boards, and institutions navigating complex organizational challenges. Her career spans public policy, education, government, and nonprofit leadership. She is also the author of *Modern Impact: Uncommon Leaders*.



THE BOOK

MODERN IMPACT: UNCOMMON LEADERS

Leadership Practices that Build Lasting Impact

AVAILABLE NOVEMBER 1, 2026
ON AMAZON

ModernImpactSolutions.org

SOURCES

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00220620.2022.2072275>

<https://www.propublica.org/article/charlottesville-other-jim-crow-legacy-separate-and-unequal-education>

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Qualified, but Not Recommended

Becoming Uncommon: A Personal Reflection on Leadership, Identity, and Impact

© 2026 Leah Dozier Walker. All rights reserved.

Published by Modern Impact Press

modernimpactsolutions.org

modernimpactsolutions.org