

Ancient Wisdom meets Modern Leadership  
to Inspire a Fresh Path Forward

# THE **nomadic** MINDSET

NEVER SETTLE...for TOO LONG

KEVIN COTTAM

Day 4:  
Follow the Rain

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DAY

4

# Follow the Rain

Mission: to hone your intuition, allowing you to see new pastures ahead

○

*“If you are a good hunter, never stay at home.*

*Get out; find the tracks of animals;  
see where they are going,*

*When they passed through, the wind direction, where to  
move, where the grass is tall enough to hide. Then you  
will be a good hunter”*

– BUSHMEN ELDER

Photo by Hicham Zemmer



## JUNE 10, 2017, GRAND MOSQUE OF PARIS, FRANCE

I sit with Romain Simenel, a French anthropologist who specializes in Berber nomads, sipping a traditional Moroccan mint tea at the Grand Mosque café. Romain is a fascinating and enthusiastic “true nomad” who has spent years researching, travelling, and living with the Berbers in Morocco. I’m excited to have the opportunity to ask him many questions.

“Why do nomads move from place to place?” I ask.

“To follow the rain,” he replies.

I’d heard this, or similar statements, before from the Massai and Mongolian nomads, but I am curious to hear Romain’s perspective.

“ *where am I going to find some grass today for my camels?*”

You are under the tent, okay? And you go to bed very early because this is the way in the desert, maybe it’s 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. You will wake up early with ease. And then, in the early morning, you climb to the highest point of the desert. Maybe it’s a dune or a little mountain or anything high. From here you are going to see the climate; you will observe the birds; you will observe everything.

You think: ‘where is the place that is more humid?’[and] ‘where am I going to find some grass today for my camels?’ You want to go and explore, yet sometimes the rain is not in your country.

In the Sahara, sometimes there are only three drops of rain now, and you wait another three months and no rain, then you wait another three months, and you get a few more drops. It’s not homogenous; it’s not equal. When you are on caravan out in the desert with your family, you may meet someone. It’s quite rare, but when you meet someone, the first question, after ‘Hello, how are you? How is the family? How are the camels and everything else,’ and finally you hear, ‘where’s the rain?’

Fascinating indeed.

Even though Follow the Rain implies primarily a physical movement, I invite you to view this philosophy from the point of view of mindset and the movement of your mind. The rain could be a new market, trend, product, position, location, creative idea, conversation, intention, or your intuition. It is about following the rain from different angles and perceptions. Doing so will help you see and experience a more holistic nomadic mindset.

Are you ready to follow that rain when it appears?

## What does Follow the Rain Mean to a Nomad?

This literal statement is linked to survival. Looking at survival from a nomad's perspective, if there is no rain, then the pastures or grasslands dry up, and if the pastures are barren, then there is no food for their livestock to graze upon. And if the animals cannot eat enough, they will become weak, malnourished, skinny, and will lose all their fat and maybe not survive. Or, they will be worthless, and the nomads won't be able to sell them. If the animals do not survive, neither will the people.

The rain is a major part of nature's food chain. It is as simple as that.

1. What does your food chain look like in your organisation?
2. What happens when your ideas dry up?
3. How do you keep the food chain moving towards the rain and get people to follow?

## How do the Nomads Know when the Rain Will Come?

Whomever I spoke to, I would invariably ask, "When do you know the rain is coming or how long in advance do you know when the rain will appear?" They all said they know a week in advance.

I was stunned . . . a week in advance? I asked if they listened to the weather reports. They said "No, they watched the animals."

Animals are the biggest indicators of change in the environment because they have a hyper-sensitivity to unforeseen changes. When they sense a change, they act and behave differently. During the Indonesian

Tsunami in 2004, animals started to move to higher ground even before the earthquake and the subsequent tsunami that followed. Observing, like vision, is one of the qualities of Follow the Rain.

Therefore, the reason nomads will move to new pastures or grasslands is purely strategic. They move first to survive, and then to thrive in greener pastures. While on the move, if they find the weather is changing directions, then they will course correct towards the rain. They have to choose whether to stay and possibly miss the rain, which may mean not having food or animals to feed their family and community, or to go, which brings risks such as predators—that might damage their livestock—or the rain not appearing, then they have invested time and energy into a move that wasn't worth it.

*When do you know the rain is coming or how long in advance do you know when the rain will appear?*

”

Whether sitting on intricately woven carpets and cushions with Habib in his makeshift tent at the Casbah Museum in Tighmert, Morocco, or out on the Sahara in a tent with Mohamed, my Moroccan driver, speaking about the indicators of rain, they all described animals' reactions the same way: dogs roll around in the sand, birds fly in groups, goats shake, camels cry out, and ants move in all different directions instead of following each other in a straight line.

Of all of these indicators, I learned ants are the biggest indicator, as they show an extreme change in behaviour by moving in all different directions as if their GPS system has malfunctioned. As the ants do, through nature's innate intuition and the nomad's interconnectedness with nature, the nomads are able to holistically plan and strategize.

The nomads know where there is rain, there will be plenty of growth in that pasture to harvest, and the animals can graze for a bit longer, and everyone will be happy.

1. What are some forewarning signals that change or disruption is coming to your corporation or industry? What signals might be appearing right now?
2. How trusting of your innate intuition are you? Are you aware enough to observe your corporate environment's mindset?
3. What do you need to do to become more observant as you Follow the Rain, not only of yourself, but of others and situations around you?

## Being Light and Nimble

*Think very fast and do not to waste your time. Emergencies happen, and you need to find a solution very fast. Elders are thinking very fast.*

– Simon Soitanae, Maasai, Head Waiter at the Mara Simba Lodge

When the Maasai decide to migrate, the elders send out their fastest and most strategic warriors to look for the rain and find new pastures. When they return with news, then the elder decides when to move. Nomads need to be light and nimble and ready to move at any time. In Mongolia and Morocco, they can pack up their yurts or tents in twenty minutes, then load up the donkeys, camels, and—now—trucks and motorbikes with all their belongings. They have few possessions and then only what they essentially need. No more no less.

To be light, nimble, and fast refers to not only physically moving your location, but also to being mentally light, nimble, and fast. This means you cannot be weighed down by physical possessions. Keep only what you need to live. Nor can you be weighed down by negative thought patterns, habits, borders, or challenging situations. You need to keep it simple, clear, and to the point. This

is the lightness of being the nomads refer to in their lives no matter where I travelled on this journey to visit them. It was incredibly refreshing to observe this lightness within them. Even if they did have many concerns about their lives, their animals, families, and more, rarely did they display it.

To be light and nimble is to have that buoyancy the nomad has within them. Movement is the most important aspect here, and not just the physical movement, but the movement of the mind to make solid decisions under often challenging and potentially life-threatening situations.

### *The “Congested” Mind = Blockages*

A Massai I had the good fortune to meet, Simon Soitanae, told me he believes people in the west—or urban dwellers in “civilized countries”—are too “congested” in their minds. I found this word “congested” interesting as it seems to be the antithesis of light and nimble. Collins Dictionary (2018) states the meaning to be,

*If there is congestion in a place, the place is extremely crowded and blocked with traffic or people, and/or congestion in a part of the body is a medical condition in which the part becomes blocked.*

The word that jumps out here is “blocked.” I would agree there is a tendency to be blocked at all levels of the food chain of a corporation as well as individually.

“*If there are too many things, your mind will destruct.*”

There is sometimes a blockage when information doesn’t cascade down to all vertical and horizontal levels and systems.

As a leader, I am sure you are blocked from time to time when making decisions, seeing the next pasture, or making personal decisions, whether this is an emotional, mental, or physical

blockage. It is apparent, considering the amount of therapy and coaching in our societies of today, this is quite common.

What are the blockages limiting you from being light, nimble, and fast thinking? Are the blockages keeping you from Following the Rain?

Simon had more great insights I would like to share with you:

People should not get congested on too many things; you should focus on one thing at a time, then you can retain better. If there are too many things, your mind will destruct. It is better to think broadly and focus in on one way forwards. The environment helps us to expand, and you don’t have

to use what you don't have. You have to think on what you have and offer not to what you don't have; think to your circumference. Those who think narrowly, they will never go ahead for long; they won't be able to do as much as they don't think outside of the box. Think broader.

“Think vastly;  
act narrowly

These two quotes reflect Simon's thoughts: “Think vastly; act narrowly” and “yat s yat urd yat fyat,” meaning to put your problems in a queue, not as a pile, and deal with them one by one. Doesn't this sound familiar? In western culture, we say “one step at a time.”

### *The Fear Factor Blocks following the Rain*

There are many different factors that may cause people or institutions to become blocked. One reason is fear, and often this is the fear of the unknown. Fear can be debilitating and, in its extreme forms, can paralyze the mind and physical movement. One way to get past fear is to expand your mindset and thoughts.

As Simon says, take one step at a time; break down a large, complex challenge into bite-size, manageable pieces. Break it into chunks, stand back, and move the problem out of you by physically putting the block or problem in front of you (on a piece of paper, a white board, etc.). Then walk around the problem, see it from different angles, and stay outside of it by observing.

The congestion is mostly about piling too many “things” on top of each other in our minds. You cannot see the forest for the trees. This creates blockages or congestion and stops the movement. As the Moroccans say, “you cannot put the whole camel in the pot at the same time, only one piece at a time.”

1. How can you be more light, nimble, and fast in your thinking?
2. What are some blockages that might be holding you back?
3. How can you think more vastly?

### **Follow the Rain's Relationship to Organisations**

How does Follow the Rain translate to an organisation or leadership?

There are different evolutionary periods in the growth and trajectory of a company, and most start by Following the Rain: this is the impetus/trigger for something new, the new pasture to graze upon, or the need in the market that hasn't been filled. Then somewhere along the evolutionary journey of the company, something will happen that might congest the thinking. Many



factors can cause this: competition, inability to move fast enough into a new market, ego-based leadership, greed, lack of spending on innovation, or simply not keeping the Eyes of the Hawk on the rapidly changing environment (i.e., losing the vision).

There are many examples of corporations that stopped Following the Rain: Nokia, Kodak, Toys ‘R Us, Border, and Blockbuster to name a few. Let’s take a closer look at what happened with Nokia and how their mindset became congested. Watch for the evolution and the change in mindsets.

## Case Study: Nokia—from Nomad to Builder to Settler to Dinosaur?

“Nokia started with a beautiful vision, and then the vision went,” Mads Winblad tells me. Mads worked for Nokia from 1990 to 2010 as first the Managing Director for Denmark and then in multiple managerial and leadership roles till he left the company. He agreed to share Nokia’s story—how it went from being an innovative, top-notch tech company to becoming so congested that it stopped Following the Rain and ultimately went the way of the dinosaur.

*Nokia started with a beautiful vision, and then the vision went ””*

### *The Departure plus Nokia's Nomadic Mindset Beginning*

In 1990, a new CEO, Jorma Ollila, came to Nokia, and this is when the mobile technology all began for Nokia. Nokia, before this time, was into selling rubber boots, televisions, toilet paper, tables, and forest industry and other products. I was asked to come on board as Managing Director in Denmark. Over the years I was there, I had many positions, which changed considerably. I was invited, at the end of 1990, to a global sales meeting, and the new CEO, who I didn’t know of, talked about [how] ‘we need to change this organisation as we were not competitive enough.’ I thought to myself laughingly, ‘what the f . . . is going on? What am I in for now?’ He disrupted the organisation, [and] we moved focus from stuff we shouldn’t work on to a shared direction, which was mobile phones.

But what he was actually saying was that all the people who had been part of Nokia before didn’t really have the competence to move into a new digital area. It would [now] be mobile phones, it would be infrastructure . . . so they should all go home and start to recruit people who maybe came from the computer industry, or whatever, to understand this.



The CEO dismantled the old business and left all of the old products and industries behind, and by 1993, the company was purely digital infrastructure and mobile phones. I had the great opportunity to be part of this innovative revolution—of change—and played a significant role on the journey, which was about changing Nokia.

It is obvious from this early beginning that the new CEO had a visionary and innovative nomadic mindset with his eye on the future looking for new pastures for growth. He was Following the Rain!

### *New Discovery*

As Mads tells me, around 1994/1995, Nokia entered into another discovery phase, heading towards the smart device:

Already in '94, '95, when I was in Sweden, we started a relationship with Hewlett Packard. HP had at that time, I can't remember what it was for, it was kind of a smart device, but there was no mobile phone integration or whatever, so we started a little bit of that kind of thinking and then back home in the facilities and so on. Nokia obviously bought a company called Cyan at that time, and Cyan had an operative system. They only wanted to take that operative system and build it into a mobile phone. We did that, and then that was how Symbian was founded. Symbian was then later put [in] Nokia's smartphones.

This is when the whole smartphone, or multimedia, as they called it, came into being.

During a two-day conference in Salzburg, Austria, Nokia invited operators and global core partners, [and] 'the purpose was to drive the industry towards this digital consumer direction in the mobile industry.'

Following this, Nokia really kicked into the 'multimedia computer' as they called it at that time. We didn't know the 'smartphone' name at that time, so Nokia actually introduced the smartphone, the multimedia computer, into the industry . . . back in 1996. In 1996 when we introduced Communicator 9000, that was a device where [when] you opened [it] you had a keyboard, and when you locked it together, you could use it as phone.

Mads shared with me an inspiring and curious meeting that his boss, Anssi Vanjoki, led. It is a perfect example of the curiosity, innovation, and nomadic intelligence that goes into risking new pastures by Following the Rain.

So the story was, Anssi had a slide [on a PowerPoint presentation] with a device with different kinds of logos. It stays like that on the slide, and it was

the only slide, and the device was called Aani. Apparently, there was a guy in Finland, and he is a businessman, and he just got a phone call from a guy in the States, from New York, saying ‘You know, we have a very important meeting; you have to come,’ so he took his device, and then on this slide there was the logo for Finnair, a logo for a hotel chain, a logo for a Finnish insurance company. He just pressed the logo for the airline, and he organized his flight to New York, [and] at the same time, he [pressed] the hotel [logo], and he organized and booked the hotel, he got the receipt, and so on. Once he arrived in New York, he had more spare time, so he wanted to walk in the city, and then while he’s walking, his Aani device started to vibrate, and the logo of the Finnish insurance company came up and was blinking, and then he pressed the logo and [in] comes a text saying, ‘Now you are moving into a restricted area, if you go further on, do you want to increase your insurance?’

*You know, we have a very important meeting; you have to come ””*

Let me stop here for a moment and say this story in many ways seems like ancient history compared to what mobile devices are capable of performing today. However, in those days, Nokia was nomadic and highly innovative, grazing in new pastures.

Before this, Nokia already had in ‘95 introduced the first camera phone, and [at] the end of the 90’s, we started to negotiate a contract with Zeiss for the Carl Zeiss lenses, when we started to bring cameras into the mobile devices.

When you are looking [back] at it today, at least two inventions had been driving Nokia phones, and [those were] bringing cameras to the mobile device . . . and bringing smartphones to the market.

From 1993, they would have global strategy sessions and workshops every year to work on vision and strategies for the future. This was then presented to the executive board, and they would choose what we would concentrate on or not. It was a robust and creative time and full of optimism and excitement for these new products and how we were growing globally.

To put what Mads said another way, these were the nomadic and builder mind-sets in full swing, producing and innovating with a strong vision.

I was so lucky to be part of that since ‘93 and the whole way up. [From] 1999 to 2001, we started to say, ‘we need to do something to enable our

multimedia devices, our smartphones, to have more power, be able to have longer battery time. To do this, we need to disrupt ourselves and slow down the development of the mobile phone with the operative system, which was in the mobile phone, because that's a dumb system. We need to focus on the multimedia computer, the intelligent software systems, we have to change.' This was being felt within the organisation.

### *Builder/Settler Mindset Settles in*

At this juncture, in 2000/2001, things changed, which led, ultimately, to the demise of Nokia and the massive market share they had in the mobile industry. Nokia had now fully entered into a builder mindset, moving years later to a settler mindset.

“*The rain, as the nomads would say, is life blood.*”

What began to happen was the necessary decisions were not made to drive resources away from mobile phones and put more resources into new operating systems for the multimedia devices. Everything was lined up for this as Nokia had a working relationship

with Intel, and they were eager to partner in the development of a new operating systems and replace the original Symbian system. This decision to shift and change pastures was, unfortunately, not taken by leadership.

Or, as Mad says,

It seemed that when the company was not running that good, a disruptive decision was taken to change, and when the company was going well and there was a definite need on the horizon to change and be disruptive, decisions were not [made] to do so.

In many large companies, especially legacy companies that don't shift, something stops them in their incredible vision and direction. This has been documented over and over with different corporate case studies. The rain, as the nomads would say, is life blood. If you don't have rain, you will not thrive or survive. This is when the warrior and wisdom of the elders steps in. This is the place of the leader of the company.

Mads believes the leadership got “greedy and complacent like many others were.”

Around 2000, we started to settle in. And we were too fat and happy. Big bonus plans, Starbucks, all that stuff, it was just too much of the good stuff, and then what happened was, it started to go down[hill].

I have very good relations with one of the guys who was the R&D Manager, and I talked with him and said, ‘What could we have done differently now, when we didn’t [make] this decision at the beginning of the 2000s?’ He was actually on the task force in 2004 to try to do it again and try to save part of Symbian and turn it into something different. He said, ‘there were so many restrictions set that were working against it. It was important that we still had the same vision—forwards-looking [and] inspiring—but it was not enough to convince the decision maker. He didn’t care anymore. That was in 2004.

### *Totally Missing the Rain*

After talking some more with Mads about the three mindsets, he enthusiastically agreed that Nokia originally had a nomadic mindset:

Nokia was a nomadic company through the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s, then they [headed to] the building phase and then settled in, and finally they were just freezing in the end. The dinosaur was on the horizon.

Mads made this observation with some sadness in his voice—he loved this company and the superior knowledge it once had.

When it really started to go bad, we got the information—I think it was 2005 or something like that—that Apple was coming out with the iPhone, and we who were fighting for this change, we said *this is only a little niche, nothing to be worried about*”

‘Yeah, we know. This is shit; we need to do something.’ Some of the other people, and actually the next CEO, mentioned in the press that ‘this is only a little niche, nothing to be worried about.’

What happened there was that we realised that Apple was coming with this, and they are coming from the computer side. We [were coming] from the mobile phone side and trying to move into this computer [side], and we tried to grab in and we couldn’t do it. They knew everything about how software should be built from the bottom, what you do for a next version of software update. We were fighting because our basic was not right, and our leadership didn’t dare to change the basic in 2000. So, we noticed that they were coming, and if we don’t do something with this, they will just take the whole market, and that was what happened.

After the change in leadership in 2006, and the realization [the] iPhone was coming in, Nokia was sunk. Rumours began to swirl around what

was going to happen with Nokia and the shareholders, and Wall Street began to get worried. Fast forwards with very little change in direction and declining sales and market share, by 2010 another leader was brought in from Microsoft, which led to the sale to Microsoft—who wanted in the mobile technology industry—of Nokia’s mobile phone area. Nokia kept its infrastructure portion, but by 2013, Microsoft got rid of Nokia.

### *Dinosaur or Comeback? Lessons Learned*

Will Nokia make a comeback? Will the phoenix rise from the ashes? Who knows? What is important to learn is the leadership lesson: the keeping of the visionary, nomadic mindset is vital to an institution’s success. Have a strong builder mindset, settle for a while, but never settle for too long.

Mads really loved Nokia and stayed there until the sale to Microsoft. He went through the whole process and was involved heavily in the innovative phase and sales.

The mindset we had in this organisation was that the future is so cool—no matter what we were moving from stone to stone—where we saw some opportunities, and some worked and some didn’t work, and then, you know, the whole thing just exploded, and I think that was the mindset.

Nokia was a brand that rocked the world of mobile telephony. They were the most popular phone—and were more popular than their competitors Ericsson and Motorola—in the early stages. They owned the title of market leader in the mobile telephone industry. As Mads observed, “The vision was right . . . it was how it was executed that went wrong.”

### *The Mindsets in Play*

Speaking about the nomadic mindset, Mads says,

I think the mindset of a nomadic company is more about curiosity [about] what can we do rather than when you come into settled organisations, [it’s] about numbers, [it’s] about cost cutting and all these kinds of things more than about focusing on what is the kind of thinking.

Nokia’s leadership had a dominance of nomadic mindset for the first 10 years in direction, energy, output, innovation, and vision. They also had a subdominance of builder and settler mindset. The driver that rallied the other mindsets was the nomadic mindset.

As a leader or CEO, are you willing to keep making nomadic mindset decisions? Or are you congested and settling?

*If you want to navigate a company with a long-term vision, you need to have a nomadic mindset; otherwise, you will not be able to do it because you will believe that it just won't work like that. So that's one thing, and if you settle, I don't think settled companies actually work that much with a vision. If they have a vision, it's probably more of a statement that is an active measurable vision of what they are doing.*

– Mads Winblad

## Why Follow the Rain?

Follow the Rain is about finding new pastures to graze upon and grow. Nomads do not want to overstay one pasture or grassland by over-harvesting or raping the environment. They do not like to ruin the land for future nomads or generations on their return to the area.

In corporate lingo, Follow the Rain means looking with the Eyes of a Hawk for innovations for the future, finding new markets, new directions within the company, purchasing companies to enhance organisational holdings, ways to engage employees, developing entrepreneurial mindsets, and more. It also means timing and strategy are vital. Nokia had all the right timing going for it. It was way ahead of the curve and its competitors like the lead runner in a 1,500 m race who loses focus on the runners behind who are keenly keeping an eye on the market leader and just waiting for the right moment to overtake first place. Then the moment appears, and the leader loses steam and slides back in the pack. Your moment in the rain has passed.



When I left Romain Simenel, the French anthropologist, in the beautiful mosque, I felt I had truly Followed the Rain by meeting with him to discover more about the nomadic mindset and corporations.



Your objective, should you choose to accept it, is to sharpen your innate intuition and observe—with more vigour—where and when the next rainfall comes. It is what brings growth. Keep a keen eye on the environment (trends), and be careful to let go or move on at the right time. By expanding and migrating to Follow the Rain, you can then Seek the Foie Gras.



## LEADERSHIP RETHINK

Essential nomadic leadership qualities to embody:

**Follow the rain**

**Open**

**Mindset**

**Observe**

**Intuition**

**Risk**

**Predators**

**Expansive**

**Light**

**Nimble**

**Fast**

**Hope**

**Drive**

**Vision**

**Explore**

## FINAL QUESTIONS

1. What does Follow the Rain mean to you? What does your innate intuition say?
2. What is the mindset of your organisation at this time in your evolutionary process? What mindset do you need more of?
3. How valuable is it for you to look at your corporation from the three mindset typologies' perspective?



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*“Having the right mindset is one of the most important success factors of great and inspiring leaders. The Nomadic Mindset is a necessary read for leaders of all levels traversing today’s disruptive environments.”*

**Marshall Goldsmith – Thinkers 50 Ranking: #1 executive coach and the only two-time #1 leadership thinker in the world**

Kevin Cottam believes the mindsets of the world and leadership is becoming increasingly narrow and inward focused; if we are to survive, thrive, and flourish in Industry 4.0, we need to expand our mindsets. He proposes the path towards an expanded mindset can be found through embracing the qualities of ancient nomadic wisdom that have changed, adapted, and survived through the test of time and, in many cases, may have been forgotten.

*“100% of executives interviewed said they needed more people with a Nomadic Mindset.”*

The Nomadic Mindset, a metaphor for “the movement of the mind,” takes you on a journey by drawing upon and vividly sharing a wide range of exhilarating real-life stories and experiences of the nomads in Mongolia, the Maasai in Kenya, the Berbers in Southern Morocco as well as executive conversations and case studies.

This rare, fresh back-to-the-future leadership book will incite you to rethink your mindset and raise your awareness of two other mindsets: the builder and settler. All three mindsets will give you insights on how you can better lead an interconnected, innovative, and engaged organisation. Look inside to discover why you should learn about the nomadic mindset and what the nomads know that you don’t.

*“A tour de force of wisdom: alive, insightful, inspirational, intriguing, timely”*