A Leader’s Legacy
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THE SUMMARY

Thinking about our legacies requires us to move beyond short-term definitions of success. Legacies encompass past, present, and future, and when pondering our legacies, we’re forced to consider where we’ve been, where we are now, and where we’re going. We’re brought face-to-face with questions of who we are and why we’re here. We have to consider more deeply the true value of what was, what is, and what will be. We search our souls for the deeper meaning in our lives. A heartfelt quest to leave a lasting legacy is a journey from success to significance.

We all have choices in our lives. One choice is to say “Hey, I’m here only for me, so I won’t bother to clean up the campsite or put out the fire. What the heck, I won’t be back here again, so why should I care?” Another is to say, “Those who follow me will want to enjoy this beautiful campsite. What can I do to ensure that their experience will be even better than mine?” Being clear that we want to leave the campsite better than we found it compels us to take actions that make it better. Legacy thinking means dedicating ourselves to making a difference, not just working to achieve fame and fortune. It also means appreciating that others will inherit what we leave behind.

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Part One: Significance

Leaders Serve and Sacrifice

Everything leaders do is about providing service. Our late colleague John Gardner once observed, “A loyal constituency is won when the people, consciously or unconsciously, judge the leader to be capable of solving their problems and meeting their needs.” John didn’t mean that the leader should personally fix the problems and fulfill the needs. What he was suggesting is that people willingly follow someone who’s attuned to their aspirations, fears, and ideals. Loyalty is not something a boss can demand. It’s something people choose to grant to a person who has earned it. The people’s choice to follow is based not simply upon authority but upon the leader’s perceived capacity to meet a need.

Without the element of servant leadership, the furthest you will get into someone’s motivation is the “have to” level. Over time, that will build a narrow, thin organization. When a leader is able to drive down deep and get to the “I want” motivation, the organization becomes a type of perpetual motion machine. It no longer takes as much energy from you as a leader because you’ve built into those around you the zeal to do a job well. The “sustain” you’ve tapped in your team will carry all of you, collectively, well into the future. The purpose of leaders is to mobilize others to serve a purpose. And if you’re here to serve a purpose, the purpose comes first. You’ll have to make sacrifices in service of that purpose.

Leadership is hard work. It’s not easy despite what we, or others, may write in our attempts to make leadership more accessible. At times we will suffer, and those we love and cherish will suffer, if only because of the trade-offs we have to make between our own personal interests and those of the greater good. If you want to be a leader, you must be willing to pay a price. By sacrifice, you demonstrate that you’re not in it for yourself. This sends the message, loud and clear, that you have the interest of others at heart.

The Best Leaders are Teachers

No matter whether you’re a leader or a new recruit, a veteran or a novice, a teacher or a student, if you’re really serious about helping others learn, you start to think, study, and prepare from the moment you’re asked to take on that role. In the process, you become consumed by learning. You know you’re on the line. You know you’re going to have to perform live in front of others, and you’d better have your stuff down cold. One of the things that leaders do is mentor and teach. And when they’re teaching, they’re learning. Not all leaders see it this way, but the very best do. Each and every interaction you have with your associates can be framed as a learning opportunity for them – and for you.

One of the most powerful legacies you can leave is to turn every person you lead into a teacher.
When they become fully engaged in the experience of learning – not just the experience of doing – people will realize a benefit that extends far beyond the production of a quality product or the performance of exemplary service. They will realize that within them is unused capacity and untapped potential. They will experience the magic of self-discovery. They will experience the great joy that comes with the realization, “I can do it!” And when you and your colleagues experience that kind of profound knowledge, there is nothing you can’t accomplish.

Each of us, whether we intend to or not, will become at some point a character in someone’s story. We all talk about people when they’re not around, and others will talk about us when we’re not around. The obvious question is, “What will they say?” This should make us wonder about a few things. What lessons am I teaching in each interaction I have? What stories will others tell about me in the future? What will others learn from those stories? What am I learning from others as I teach?

The best leaders are the most passionate about their work, their organization, and their disciplines. Their enthusiasm is contagious, and others catch that enthusiasm and display it in their own work. There are only two reasons great teachers know more than their students, and great leaders know more than their constituents. One, they’ve dedicated themselves to learning. Two, they love what they’re learning. Come to think of it, maybe that’s just one reason.

**We All Need Loving Critics**

The late John Gardner once remarked, “Pity the leader caught between unloving critics and uncritical lovers.” We’re quite taken by this observation. It should be on a poster that hangs over every leader’s desk and it should be read and contemplated several times a day.

Credibility, which is at the foundation of leadership, from a behavioral perspective is about doing what you say you will do. But how can you do what you say if you don’t know how you’re doing? If you never ask for feedback on your behavior and on how your behavior affects how others are doing, how can you really expect to align your words and your actions over the long haul? There’s solid evidence that the best leaders are highly attuned to what’s going on inside themselves as they are leading and to what’s going on with others. They’re very self-aware and they’re very socially aware. They can tell in short order whether they’ve done something that has enabled someone to perform at a higher level or whether they’ve sent motivation heading south.

Paying attention to the early warnings prevents more serious problems later. Setting up a system for getting regular feedback and paying attention to that feedback will help you move the organization forward more effectively. All leaders want to have a positive impact on performance. It’s part of their legacy. The only way they can know if they’re having the desired impact is to get regular feedback on how they’re doing. Leaders need more loving critics. Try this next time you’re in a meeting. Begin by asking, “How am I doing?” More than likely you’ll be greeted with stunned silence – a sure sign folks are not used to being asked this question by you (or anyone else) and are uncomfortable in
responding. But if you wait long enough some brave soul may venture an honest response. When that happens, immediately recognize the speaker for showing some courage, and tell the rest of the group, “That’s what we need more around here. More loving critics.”

You Are the Most Important Leader in Your Organization

When at work – whether in the executive suite, the retail shop, the factory floor, the back room, a field operation, or the corporate headquarters – the person most likely to influence our performance, positively or negatively, is our most immediate manager. That person is most likely to influence the trajectory of our careers, our ethical behavior, and our satisfaction with our jobs.

If you’re a parent, teacher, coach, or community leader, you are the person setting the example for young people. It’s not hip-hop artists, movie stars, professional athletes, or the president of the United States they look to for guidance on leadership. You are the one they are most likely going to look to for how a leader responds to competitive situations, or handles crises, or deals with loss, or resolves critical dilemmas. It’s not someone else. It’s you.

At this point many people make a comment that goes something like this: “Well, I really believe in this leadership stuff, but, you know, my boss doesn’t practice the kind of leadership you’re talking about. What am I supposed to do?” Our answer: you can’t pass the leadership buck. Just because your manager doesn’t do leadership well doesn’t excuse you from doing your very best. Your direct reports don’t really care about what your manager does, but they care a lot about what you do.

There’s no escape. When it comes to leading, you have to take responsibility for the quality of leadership your constituents get. For parents it might be how you model respect with interacting with your neighbors; for teachers it might be in how you inspire young people to learn; for coaches it might be in how you challenge your players to realize their full potential even when they don’t see it; for community leaders it might be in how you enable and encourage citizen participation. You – and that means all of us – are accountable for the leadership you demonstrate.

The question for each of us, then, is not “Do I matter?” but “How do I matter?” Since you are the most important leader in your organization, the only solution to this conundrum is to act. Those who sit around and wait don’t leave lasting legacies. Those who stand up and make something happen do.

No One Likes to Be an Assumption

No one likes being taken for granted. No one likes being ignored, overlooked, or dismissed. Friends don’t like it. Spouses don’t like it. Employees don’t like it. Saying “Well, I just assumed you knew how much I appreciate what you do” is not going to motivate anyone to higher levels of performance. We all want to know that we’re appreciated, and we want to hear it first hand. Not expressing appreciation to others is equivalent to making them feel invisible.
Research makes it clear that if we’re going to make it to the summit we need someone shouting in our ear, “Come on, you can do it. I know you can do it!” It’s not something we easily admit – a lot of times we think we can do it alone. To some, praise and recognition may seem unimportant, inappropriate, or even trivial. But we humans really do need encouragement. Only two percent of managers find that encouragement doesn’t matter much to them. The rest of us acknowledge that encouragement boosts performance, strengthens our resolve, and improves our health.

There are few if any needs more basic than to be noticed, recognized, and appreciated for our efforts. That’s as true for volunteers, teachers, doctors, priests, and politicians as it is for the maintenance staff, the sales force, or those in the executive suite. There’s little wonder, then, that a greater volume of thanks is reported in highly innovative companies than in less innovative ones. Extraordinary achievements never bloom in barren and unappreciative settings.

Notes of thanks, stickers of approval, or plaques of recognition, however, aren’t what earn increased commitment. What makes these gestures effective is our genuine concern and respect for those who are doing the work. We need to accept and acknowledge that nothing really significant can ever be achieved unless people feel appreciated by their leaders. People who are ignored aren’t going to put forth the effort it takes to sustain greatness.

There are very few things in life that we can claim to have accomplished without the help of others. In leadership, nothing that we achieve is singular. Nothing. You never, ever do it alone. A leader’s legacy is really the legacy of many. Leaders make unique contributions, but others play significant parts. Showing appreciation ensures that everyone will realize that they aren’t being taken for granted, that they aren’t an assumption, and that they aren’t ignored. They will know how important they are to the creation of something meaningful.

Part Two: Relationships

Leadership is Personal

We’ve said this many times, and it’s worth repeating again. Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. There may have been a time when leaders could command commitment, but those times are long past. People follow people, not positions. If there’s not some sense of personal relationship, then it’s just less likely that people will want to follow.

We don’t lead our lives in solitary confinement. We lead our lives out in the open. We lead our lives in the company of others, and that is where we leave our legacy. It’s the quality of our relationships that most determines whether our legacy will be ephemeral or lasting.
Leaders Should Want to Be Liked

We will work harder and more effectively for people we like. And we will like them in direct proportion to how they make us feel. Still not a week goes by that we don't hear someone in an executive role say something to this effect: “I don't care if people like me. I just want them to respect me.” Get real! This statement is utter nonsense – contrary to everything we know about effective leadership. Think about it for a moment. Is this a binary choice? Are we restricted to either liking or respecting someone? Can't we have both? Can't we both like and respect a person?

When we talk to people about the leaders they admire – the ones they'd stay up late for, the ones they'd bust their butts for, the ones they'd die for – we never hear anyone tell us, “Well I hated that woman, but I’d follow her to the ends of the earth!” Or, “He was a real jerk, but I sure was inspired to do my best for him.” The leaders people want to follow are the ones for whom they have genuine affection. Love is definitely not too strong a word to use for how the best leaders feel about their constituents and how their constituents feel about these leaders.

Our research, and practically everyone else’s on the subject, clearly shows that people perform significantly more effectively when their leaders treat them with dignity and respect, listen to them, support them, recognize them, make them feel important, build their skills, and show confidence in them. Likeability is a major factor in being successful in just about every endeavor in life.

A tough truth about leading – and one that doesn’t get talked about enough – is that sometimes you hurt others and sometime you get hurt. You can’t hit the delete key and eliminate these times from your job. You can’t delegate them to others. They come with the territory. It’s also true that when you’re in a leadership role, the chances are great that not everyone is going to like you. When you take a strong stand on guiding values and on a vision of the future, there’s no way that everyone is going to be happy about what you say and what you do. This truth should not deter us from wanting to be liked. Being motivated to have others like us will result in more empowering actions on our part than just wanting to be respected. Being motivated to want others to like us will make us more concerned about them than we are about ourselves.

And here’s a final piece of advice. If you have people working for you in leadership roles who truly don’t care if other people don’t like them, then fire them. They may not like you, but everyone else will.

When You Don’t See Eye to Eye, Seek to Understand

Experience is a great teacher, and not all experiences are going to be pleasant. Many will be filled with conflict and tension. Working with people with whom you have difficulty is a terrific laboratory. It can help you learn how to handle the most challenging circumstances. Whenever you find yourself in a serious conflict with someone, ask yourself, “What is it that I need to learn? What
is this person or situation trying to teach me?” You may find out what’s really important to you. You may become conscious about a deficiency in your own abilities. You may realize what’s at stake for you. What’s crucial is that you become more self-aware – and self-awareness is a predictor of success in leadership.

Learning about ourselves is the first step toward overcoming differences. Learning more about others is the second. Many disagreements aren’t a matter of right or wrong. The world is too complex for that. Maybe it’s your approach to dealing with someone else that’s not working. The wisest advice we can give is never to expect someone else to change. You have no control over that. The only person you control is yourself, and sometimes even that is in doubt!

We need to take the responsibility to reach out and engage, creating a communication channel that works for both parties and letting our managers know how they can help us succeed. Understanding our managers’ working styles and being sensitive to their challenges can also go a long way toward creating an effective working partnership. Even in the best of partnerships, disagreements and conflicts will arise. Being able to relate the conflict to specific issues and to keep from taking it personally is essential.

When you’re in a difficult and tense situation, the first and most important thing to find out is if everyone involved shares the same purpose and goals. It’s crucial to talk about desired outcomes and make every effort to get everyone aligned. Once you’re working toward the same set of goals and operating by the same set of norms, you’ll be less likely to second-guess each other’s motives and more likely to understand, and be less bothered by, each other’s working styles.

You Can’t Take Trust for Granted

What does trust look like? Trust is openness. Trust is valuing other people such that you respect their opinions and perspectives. You listen to them. Trust means moving outside your comfort zone and letting go of always doing it your way, or even the way that “it’s always been done before.” Trust requires honesty with oneself as well as with others. Trust means not making commitments you can’t keep; it requires not overpromising no matter how much you wish you could do something. Trust requires a willingness to let others take charge, and to let others, at times, make mistakes in doing things they have never done before.

For leaders, trust is the willingness to be vulnerable and open up to others even when doing so may risk real harm. Trust is relying on others, having confidence in others, and this can be difficult for the best of us, but especially for leaders. If trusting means making yourself vulnerable and you’re the leader, then that means your life and career are on the line, too. You’re exposed to the consequences of their actions, not just your own. Leaders don’t like to feel defenseless, weak, helpless, and at risk.

But if you don’t trust, then what? Many things just won’t get done. You’re left with doing more and
more work yourself. You’re left with constantly checking up on other people’s work, spending time micromanaging. You’re left with getting less than the best from your team. And the more you don’t trust them – the less faith and confidence you express and demonstrate in them – the less they come to trust you in return. Eventually, you burn out from the workload and stress. Indeed, one of the top impediments to career success is the inability to trust others.

So, if you want the best relationships and outcomes, you have to trust. And you have to understand that in the game of trust, it’s leaders who have to ante up first. This means taking a lot of time to build relationships. It means listening carefully to others. It means getting to know about their capabilities, needs, and aspirations. It means talking about values and being clear about norms. It means being on the same page about performance standards, customer expectations, and about why what we do matters.

Sometimes, despite our best efforts (and theirs), people don’t do their jobs. Sometimes they let us down. Sometimes they betray us. Sometimes the social bond of trust comes unglued. What do we do? Your only option is to keep working on building and sustaining trust. Keep working on the relationships, on the common understandings.

Let Your People Go

Motivation has to come from within. Even if people were to do something while we were watching over their shoulders, if they lacked the internal drive to do it – that feeling of personal enthusiasm and interest – their work would come to a screeching halt the moment we stopped monitoring them. The only effective approach to sustaining performance is to tap into people’s natural drive for autonomy, and invite people to join in the adventure.

Choice is the glue that binds individuals to actions, motivating them to accept responsibility. Over and over again we’ve learned that the best predictor of a project’s failure or success is whether people volunteered or were assigned to it. In volunteering, they indicate their belief that they can do what’s required. People who believe they can do something are considerably more likely to be successful than those who don’t expect to do well. Choice unleashes people’s internal drive – and their leadership – to do what’s necessary to make things happen.

To say that leaders should always increase freedom and relax all constraints is intellectually dishonest and totally unrealistic. To say that constituents should always accept constraints and never challenge the status quo is equally dishonest and unrealistic. We can count on people to strive to be free. We can also count on organizations to exert constraints. Part of our job as leaders is to engage people in grappling with the tension between freedom and constraint. More freedom is becoming the norm. But it would be foolish and irresponsible to expect organizations to abandon all constraints. Institutions must have limits; the question is not whether there are constraints but how many, how much, and of what type.
To make a meaningful difference we each have to make our own meaningful choices. If leaders steal from others the opportunities to make such choices, they steal a bit of the legacy those others might have created. People can’t make their own mark if someone else is holding their hand all the time. At some point you have to let go of that hand and leave others to write their own histories.

Part 3: Aspirations

Lead from the Inside Out

Developing ourselves as leaders begins with knowing our own key convictions; it begins with our value system. Clarifying our own values and aspirations is a highly personal matter, and no one else can do it for us. To exhibit harmonious leadership – leadership in which our words and deeds are consonant – we must be in tune internally. We must know who we are, what’s important to us, and what is not.

Leadership begins with something that grabs hold of us and won’t let go. And this “something” will only be found when we are willing to take a journey through our inner territory – a journey that often requires opening doors that are shut, walking in dark spaces that are frightening, and touching the flame that burns; but at the end is truth. This is precisely what we’ve found in several of our own studies. Clarity of personal values matters greatly to our feeling motivated, creative, and committed to our workplaces. When we’re clear about our personal values we feel empowered, ready, and prepared to take action. Ready to be a leader.

When you are not clear about your personal values it’s hard to imagine how you can stand up for your beliefs, isn’t it? How can you speak out if you don’t know what’s important to you? How can you have the courage of your convictions if you have no convictions? Leaders who aren’t clear about what they believe are likely to change their positions with every fad or opinion poll. Without core beliefs and with only shifting positions, would-be leaders are judged as inconsistent and derided for being political in their behavior.

Developing leadership capacity is not about stuffing a whole bunch of new information or trying out the latest technique. It’s about leading out of what is already in your soul. It’s about liberating the leader within you. It’s about setting yourself free. It’s about putting your ear to your heart and just listening.

Forward-Looking Is a Leadership Prerequisite

You can leave a lasting legacy only if you can imagine a brighter future, and the capacity to imagine exciting future possibilities is the defining competence of leaders. Today’s leaders have to be concerned about tomorrow’s world and those who will inherit it. They are the custodians of the future, and it’s their job to make sure that they leave their organizations in better shape than they found them.
Our failure at being forward-looking may result more from our mindlessness in the present than from any other factor. We operate on automatic pilot, not really noticing what’s going on around us, believing that we know everything we need to know, viewing the world through established categories and operating from a single point of view. Many leaders are not really “present” at all. The body may be in the room, but the mind has been turned off.

To increase our ability to conceive of new and creative solutions to today’s problems, we have to stop, look, and listen. We have to stop doing for some amount of time each day, then start noticing more of what’s going on around us right now. To notice things you have to be present, you have to pay attention, and you have to be curious. Look around. Most innovation is more a matter of noticing what’s going on in the here-and-now than it is of gazing into some crystal ball. The best leaders are the best observers of the human condition. They just pay more attention than everyone else to all that’s around them. Look at the familiar in novel ways. Look for differences and distinctions. Look for patterns. Look at things from multiple perspectives. Look for unmet needs. Listen to the weak signals. Listen to the unheard voices. Listen for things you’ve never heard before. When we stop, look, and listen we’re always amazed at all the possibilities.

At the same time, we also need to raise our heads and gaze out toward the horizon. Being forward-looking is not the same as meeting the deadline for your current project. The leader has to ask, “What will we be doing after the project is completed?” If you’re not thinking about what’s happening after the completion of your longest-term project, then you’re thinking only as long-term as everyone else. In other words, you’re redundant! The leader’s job is to think about the next project, and the one after that, and the one after that.

And remember. You don’t have to do this all by yourself. Just because your constituents expect you to be forward-looking, that doesn’t mean you can’t ask for help. Get everyone involved in asking, “What’s next? Where is this assignment right now taking us in the future?” And talk out loud about the implications of the things you anticipate.

It’s Not Just the Leader’s Vision

What people really want to hear is not the leader’s vision. They want to hear about their own aspirations. They want to hear how their dreams will come true and their hopes will be fulfilled. They want to see themselves in the picture of the future that the leader is painting. The very best leaders understand that their key task is inspiring a shared vision, not selling their own idiosyncratic view of the world.

To be able to describe a compelling image of the future, you have to be able to grasp what others want and need. To appeal to others and to show them how their interests will be served, you have to know their hopes, dreams, motives, and interests. This means you have to know your constituents, and you have to speak to them in language they will find engaging. If you’re trying
to mobilize people to move in a particular direction, then you’ve got to talk about the future
destination in ways that your audience will find appealing. It’s got to be something that they care
about as much as you do, or even more.

Getting others excited about future possibilities is not about creating better PowerPoint
presentations. It’s not about better public speaking skills, although that would help. And it’s
certainly not about being more charming or charismatic. It’s about intimacy. It’s about familiarity.
It’s about empathy. The kind of communication needed to enlist others in a common vision
requires understanding constituents at a much deeper level than we normally find comfortable. It
requires understanding others’ strongest yearnings and their deepest fears. It requires a profound
awareness of their joys and their sorrows. It requires experiencing life as they experience it.

If you’re going to stir the souls of your constituents, if you are going to lift them to a higher level
of performance, then this is what you need to know: It’s not the leader’s vision; it’s the people’s
vision that matters most.

**Liberate the Leader in Everyone**

It’s pure myth that only a lucky few can ever understand the mystery of leadership. Leadership is
not a place, and it’s not a secret code that can’t be deciphered by ordinary people. The truth is that
leadership is an observable set of skills and abilities that are useful whether one is in the executive
suite or on the front line, on Wall Street or Main Street; and any skill can be strengthened, honed,
and enhanced if we have the motivation and desire, practice, and get coaching feedback.

Of course some people are better at it than others. Again, so what? The more we attribute
leadership to a set of innate character traits, the more we abdicate our own responsibility to
become the best we can be. The more we wait for genetic scientists to help us select the best and
the brightest, the more we avoid personal accountability for the work we must do.

It’s our collective task to liberate the leader within ourselves and within every one of us. Rather
than view leadership as an innate set of character traits – a self-fulfilling prophecy that dooms
society to having only a few good leaders – it’s far healthier and more productive to assume that
it’s possible for everyone to learn to lead. By assuming that leadership is learnable, we can discover
how many good leaders there really are. Somewhere, sometime, the leader within each of us will
get the call to step forward. By believing in ourselves and by developing our capacity to lead, we’ll
be prepared when that call comes. And for each time we accept that call, we say yes to one more
opportunity to leave a lasting legacy.

**Leaders Are Followers, Too!**

Leaders should never get hung up with being “in charge.” They should always keep their focus
on the destination. They should be asking themselves, “Where are we going and how are we
planning to get there? Who’s the best person at this moment to lead the process of getting us from where we are to where we want to be? Is it me, or is it another member of our team? Where does the expertise lie? Who’s best connected to the sources of information? Who’s got the most creative and innovative ideas that’ll help us all succeed?”

Unless we truly understand the interdependency between leaders and followers and how leaders themselves need to be followers, then in any quest to leave a legacy we become vulnerable to the sin of hubris. If we come to think of ourselves as “the leader” then we’re likely to be blind to what others contribute or deaf to the cries of those around us. We’ll come to think of ourselves as better than others – you know, those “little people” around us – and cut ourselves off from their good ideas and their good graces.

Being a follower is good for the soul. It reminds us that we’re not alone, that any success we enjoy is dependent upon the success of others, and that we’ve got to remain open to learning. Humility comes from grasping these fundamental ideas and realizing that our own legacies are built on the legacies of those who have come before us and those who labor alongside of us.

**Part 4: Courage**

**There’s Courage in All of Us**

Courage is about making tough choices, but those choices more often than not involve the little things we do. Do I say yes or do I say no? Do I stay or do I leave? Do I speak or do I stay silent? None of these choices on the surface feel particularly frightening, but in the proper context they can be terrifyingly difficult. It’s not for anyone to decide whether someone else’s act is courageous or not. Ultimately what takes courage and what does not is a very personal decision.

Leadership is about taking people to places they’ve never been before, and we can’t go to those places without courage. Leadership is courage in action. Courage gives us the energy to move forward. Courage gives us the confidence to believe we can make it. Courage gives us the strength to sustain ourselves in the darkest hours. Courage enables us to leave a legacy that declares, “I was here and I made a difference.”

**You Can’t Plan to Be Courageous, But You Can Choose It**

All acts of courage are associated with adversity and hardship. Severe challenge is always the context surrounding the moments of courage. If they were easy, they wouldn’t require courage. It may seem obvious that challenge, adversity, difficulty, or danger set the agenda for courage, save one thing; it’s all relative. Moments of courage are moments of truth. They are those critical incidents in our lives when we come face-to-face with who we are and what we are made of. They
are self-revealing moments, or as one executive said to us: “Adversity introduces you to yourself.” By honestly opening up about our adversities, we are getting to know ourselves.

Media portrayals of courage make it seem as if being fearless and being courageous are synonyms. We may even get the sense that if we’re afraid, then we can’t possibly have courage. But nothing could be further from the truth. Fear and courage go hand in hand. Moments of courage can be unpleasant. We may even anticipate great danger and harm. The anxieties are unique to the person and the situation, which is why no two cases of courage are ever exactly the same. Yet there is the common thread of confronting one personal demon or another.

There is no such thing as acting courageously and feeling no fear or sense of potential loss. Fear is what makes the conversation real. In each of the cases we gathered on moments of courage, something significant was at stake. There was the potential for loss – of careers, jobs, money, friends, or face. When you step into the zone of courage you’re exposed. You’re hanging out there. You’re not playing it safe. The consequences can be severe, or at least they feel that way at the time.

If there is one thing that seems to stop us from acting courageously, it’s our unwillingness to suffer. We’re not always ready, but nonetheless courage doesn’t occur without some degree of suffering and loss. Sometimes it’s temporary and will pass, but other times it may persist for years. Before we can act with great courage we have to be mentally, emotionally, and physically prepared to make sacrifices.

You can’t plan to be courageous. No one told us that on a particular moment, on a particular day, they intended to be courageous. But you can choose it. Engaging in conversations about your own and others’ life struggles is one crucial way to begin preparing for that choice.

**It Takes Courage to Make a Life**

We may be able to make a living – and a very secure and comfortable one at that – without exercising courage. Yet most of us want more from life than security and comfort. We also want a life full of meaning and significance. We want a life that matters, a life that makes some kind of difference to our family and friends, and even possibly to our organizations, our communities, and our world. It takes courage to make that kind of life. It takes courage to make a lasting difference.

On the first day of December 1955, the bus driver of the Cleveland Avenue bus in Montgomery, Alabama, demanded that black riders move from their seats in the racially neutral middle section of the bus to make way for white passengers. Rosa Parks, one of those black riders, remained seated. When he asked her directly if she was going to stand up, she said, “No, I am not.” When he told her that if she didn’t move he’d have her arrested, she said, “Go ahead.”

Rosa Park’s actions weren’t strategic or grand. They weren’t self-promotional or manipulative.
They weren’t complex or superhuman. They were simple and mundane. In the context of the times, her actions and the ensuing courtroom proceedings certainly had all the elements of high drama. It was an extremely tense and potentially explosive situation. But when you closely examine her actual behaviors – not moving, saying no, and willingly getting arrested – they’re actions that each and every one of us has the personal resources to take. It’s stunning to realize how small things can have such a large impact.

By her refusal to move from her seat, Rosa Parks demonstrated the power of one person. She showed us all that it’s possible for one human being to make a difference. She showed us that each of us matters in this life on this earth. Courageous acts flow from a commitment to deeply held beliefs – you can’t separate the two. “I didn’t get on the bus that day to get arrested. I got on the bus to go home,” she writes in her autobiography. “It’s funny to me how people came to believe that the reason I did not move from my seat was that my feet were tired. My feet were not tired, but I was tired of unfair treatment.”

But I’m not Rosa Parks, you say. Well, get this; Rosa Parks wasn’t the Rosa Parks we celebrate today until after she did what she did. Before that she was a seamstress and a citizen. Before that she was just like the rest of us. It was her courageous actions that made the difference. She could have moved, but she didn’t. She could have stayed silent, but she didn’t.

When someone or something challenges one of your deeply held beliefs and you grab hold of that opportunity right then and there to confront it, you have a Rosa Parks Moment. The value doesn’t have to be something as monumental as freedom and justice, but it does have to be something that is extraordinarily important to you. It has to be a time when you say to yourself, “Enough is enough; I’m not going to take it anymore.” And you have to be resolute about it. No fence sitting. No hemming and hawing. No equivocating. This is the moment; this is the time when you have to act. When that young man in Tiananmen Square stood alone in front of the government’s tank, he was exercising a Rosa Parks Moment.

Rosa Parks Moments are turning points in our lives. They may even become turning points in other people’s lives. The greater the number of people who resolutely seize that moment when core values are challenged, the greater the likelihood that individual lives will be improved and organizations and communities will be renewed. You never really know what might become a legacy.

The Courage to Be Human

The courage to be human is the courage to be humble. It takes a lot of courage to admit that you aren’t always right, that you can’t always anticipate every possibility, that you can’t envision every future, that you can’t solve every problem, that you can’t control every variable, that you aren’t always congenial, that you make mistakes, and that you are, well, human. It takes courage
to admit all these things to others, but it may take even more courage to admit them to you. If you can find the humility to do that, however, you invite others into a courageous conversation. When you let down your guard and open yourself up to others, you invite them to join you in the creation of something that you alone could not create. When you become more modest and unpretentious, others have the chance themselves to become visible and noticed.

We could use a bit more grace in the world these days. We could use more good will, more charm, more elegance, and more thanksgiving. We could also use more forgiveness – starting with forgiving ourselves for our own limitations and shortcomings. But let’s not stop there. We have to extend that same compassion to others. Leaders aren’t saints. They’re human beings, full of the same flaws and failings as the rest of us. This is not a recommendation to coddle the corporate criminals, only a suggestion that, in the course of living our lives as courageously as we can, we will all fail, and sometimes we’ll fail miserably. Forgiveness can lighten that heavy burden just a little bit.

**Failure Is Always an Option**

Telling people that failure is not an option is just plain nonsense. Failure is always an option. In real life, when we’re trying to do something we’ve never done before, we virtually never get it right the first time. And if we do, it’s sheer luck. In real life, we make lots of mistakes when doing something new and different. In real life, failure is always an option.

The truth is that failures and disappointments are inevitable. It is how you handle them that will ultimately determine your effectiveness and success. You have to be honest with yourself and with others. You have to own up to your mistakes and reflect on your experiences so that you gain the learning necessary to be better the next time around. Resilience is critical to leadership and learning.

Life is our laboratory, and we ought to use it to conduct as many experiments as possible. Try, fail, and learn. That should be the leader’s mantra. History will not judge us harshly for our failures if we learn from them, but it will be unkind to us if we fail to try, and if we fail to learn. It seems to us that those who have left the most lasting legacies are those who have failed but then tried again, for it’s that final try that makes all the difference.

**No Money-Back Guarantee**

News Flash: You can do all this leadership stuff perfectly and still get fired! Perhaps we should have told you that sooner, but it’s our guess that you knew it already. You knew it from your personal experience, or you knew it from the experience of those close to you. You knew it because no one can ever be that good.

If perfection is not the leadership ideal, what is? The answer is being more of who you are. We
each have certain gifts to offer, certain talents to share, certain contributions to make. Taking
the lead gives us a chance to make those public. It gives us a chance to define ourselves and in
the process offer our best selves to others. It gives us a chance to assert a point of view and see
if others share similar dreams and aspirations. It gives us the chance to present something that’s
important to us, and by doing so add value to the lives of others. It gives us the chance to make a
difference.

Our challenge is to stay focused on the difference we want to make, why we think it’s essential to
be moving in that direction, and on the people who will come after us to inherit what we leave. If
we stay focused on the difference and the people, the legacy will take care of itself.

The Pastor’s Perspective

Kouzes and Posner consistently write some of the best leadership material out there. I never fail to
come away with fresh insights from their writings.

I really was struck by their comments on how essential courage is for a leader. There really is no
way around it. You can’t step into the (unknown) future, much less create a future, without taking
some risks. I’ve always thought of courage as requiring us to face our fears—that seems self-
evident. What struck me afresh was the reality that suffering is a requirement. K&P say:

“If there is one thing that seems to stop us from acting courageously, it’s our unwillingness to suffer. We’re
not always ready, but nonetheless courage doesn’t occur without some degree of suffering and loss.”

That has certainly been my experience, but I’ve never identified it so clearly. When I think back
on times in my leadership where I didn’t act with courage, it was usually because there was some
cost, some price, that I didn’t want to pay. Sometimes I was aware of it; sometimes I wasn’t, or
at least tried to avoid looking at it. This is another area where self-awareness becomes critical—if
you can honestly identify what price(s) you are and aren’t willing to pay, you can make a values-
based decision, rather than just reacting to whatever the situation seems to be.

The other thing that stuck out to me was the idea that leaders should want to be liked. This may
be the first time that I have heard the desire to be liked framed in a positive way. Usually the
desire to be liked is framed in a way that implies pandering, or abandoning values in order to
become popular. Being a people-pleaser, really. But it makes sense—leaders who are liked can be
much more effective than those who aren’t. The challenge is to become liked because you are a
caring, competent person full of integrity. With that combination, there is no limit to the level of
influence you can have.