

Discovering the Leader in You

A Guide to Building Your Personal Leadership Potential

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Chapter One: Where Does Leadership Fit in Your Life?

As counselors and trainers of executives, we've noticed our clients expressing new feelings and patterns of thought in recent years. Many of the leaders we work with seem less sure that they've found the best place for themselves in the world simply because they have found a leadership position. Despite high levels of achievement, they often admit to a feeling that something isn't right.

From conversations and other interactions with many who have passed through our leadership training programs, we've concluded that the problem often is that they have assumed leadership roles without thinking through what being a leader means to them personally. Although they may feel that they are in charge of the daily aspects of being a leader, they have never carefully examined how their work as a leader derives from or serves their personal goals, values, and abilities. As a result, they feel uncertain about whether they're spending their best years doing what they really want to do.

Do you sometimes wonder whether being a leader is really worth your while, given all the other things you could be doing with your life? Are you finding that holding a leadership position is different than you anticipated? Do you feel uncertain about whether you were cut out for leadership? Are you a prospective leader who's wondering whether leadership is really where you want to be? In this chapter, we'll explore questions like these and explain how the rest of this book can help you resolve them on a personal level through structured sets of discussions, questions, and exercises.

In essence, this book addresses two main questions: If you find yourself in a leadership position today or hope to enter or reenter leadership in the future, do you have a vision of what you'd like your leadership work to accomplish for you personally as well as for your organization? And are your personal goals, values, needs, and resources such that your work in leadership can truly be both personally rewarding and outwardly fruitful?

DID YOU CHOOSE A CAREER IN LEADERSHIP?

Between us, the authors, we have nearly half a century of experience in assisting executives in the development of their talents and careers. In the past decade or so, more and more of our clients have come to us with questions about their place in the world of leadership and the place of leadership in their lives. Previously, they would come to us to help them understand their strengths and developmental needs or to grapple with issues such as how to become a more effective agent of change; how to confront structural problems in the organization; how to handle politics or difficult co-workers; or how to minimize the tremendous stress of executive roles. Then we began to hear more worries from executives about their fulfillment as leaders than about their functions as leaders. We heard them expressing more dissatisfaction with their work lives. Even when performing well in their work, they expressed reservations about not having control over the personal aspects of their careers.

Of course, we've wondered why such issues have become more common in recent years. Some reasons may lie mainly within the individuals. Has the human potential movement shifted many people's concepts of what constitutes a happy life? Is a new generation of executives demanding more personal meaning in their work lives? Have there been changes in career patterns or family relationships? To all of these questions the answer is most likely yes. Perhaps these changes at least account for a greater ability these days to articulate the problem.

There may also be external reasons. Has the task of leadership changed? What about recent structural changes in business? In today's flat organizations of complex, dispersed authority, there is a need for leadership at all levels, from customers and suppliers up (or across) through each team and group to the senior executive level. The demands of leadership arise in many guises, not always clearly signaled by job title or official status in an organization. A senior "analyst" discovers that her position involves encouraging other analysts to do their best work just as much as it does applying her own technical skills. A senior "graphic artist" finds that he is more often attempting to inspire good work in outsource artists than he is in creating images of his own. At all levels, individuals can and do become leaders by default.

We believe that this is one key factor: In all kinds of organizations, large and small, private and public, managers and executives often drift into leadership positions inappropriate to their values, nature, or abilities. Initially excited about new opportunities for leadership, executives often soon discover themselves in a new position in which they feel mismatched or unprepared. The thrill of advancement and the seductiveness of power have carried them along the fast track to unexpected and sometimes less fulfilling destinations.

Other executives have found themselves in uneasy leadership positions because of someone else's dream for them—perhaps that of a spouse or parents. Still other executives find themselves dissatisfied because they are underchallenged: their talents and résumés clearly qualify them for senior responsibilities that they haven't presumed to seek and that have somehow not drifted their way.

Whether underqualified, underchallenged, or in some other way miscast, many executives today feel out of place or misaligned with regard to the leadership demands and possibilities inherent in their current roles. We believe that these people would benefit by choosing more consciously the best times and places to assert themselves as leaders. We think that they should also spend some time asking how valuable the rewards of leadership are in their lives.

A Blind Spot

In 1998, seeking a better understanding of this problem, we conducted focused interviews to gather perspectives from thirty-two managers who had recently completed executive development programs. (See Appendix A for interview questions.) The interviews revealed that many of them had drifted into or away from leadership roles without conducting much of a conscious, guided evaluation of themselves as leaders. This was somewhat puzzling, considering that the programs that our interviewees attended were designed for people who wanted to improve their practice of leadership through extensive feedback and increased self-awareness. The individuals were thus a self-selected sample of managers willingly engaged in sometimes difficult self-exploration. Yet even in this group, leadership roles had been attained very often mainly through drift.

For example, we asked our interviewees, "Have you thought about a life plan around leadership? Was leadership a conscious decision?" In a few cases, the answers were yes; the individuals had indeed given much thought to themselves in leadership roles. The ones who had done this work seemed to us more self-assured. Some had chosen to move to the next level, and one or two were content to end their careers in their present jobs. In either case, they stood on solid ground.

For the most part, however, our respondents were stumped. They admitted that they had not given leadership per se the same consideration they had once given their technical specialties.

"Well, I guess not," said one manager. "I don't even give it a second thought. You know, it's like you just try to get through each day and do the best you can."

Another admitted that he "fell into" his position. Another told us, "If I start getting crazy, that would help me make a decision. You know, if my life started spiraling out of control."

Overall, it confirmed our idea that there were few managers who had actively sought or were truly comfortable in their identities as leaders. We were struck by how rare it is for people in leadership positions today to have thought to any great extent about their careers as essentially careers in leadership. We were also concerned by how many interviewees were asking, "Is assuming the leadership role worth the effort?"

So we'd like to pose a few starting questions:

How much of your life today is about leadership?

Do you see yourself as a leader?

How comfortable do you feel in that identity?

Did you actually choose to become a leader?

Would you like to be more (or less) of a leader?

Do the benefits of leadership outweigh the costs?

The Problem of Drift

Many highly capable individuals have drifted into leadership roles. Organizational currents carry them upward, so that they arrive at leadership without ever having taken charge of their choices. A gap then arises between who they are as people and who they are as leaders.

Sometimes drift combines with a follower's frame of mind, as reflected by one executive we interviewed:

The gentleman whose job I took two years ago at my current site-this is the second job I've followed him into. I took his last job, and I took this job when he left. We have this little parade going. [As for my next move,] I guess I'll just wait and see. That's really all I can do because the next job I really want was just taken over by someone recently; now

that department is going through a major overhaul, and it'll probably be a good two or three years before she moves on and that job becomes open. She would be an ideal person to follow. She's a trailblazer in our organization. I want to be visibly aligned with her.

In other cases, the drift seems to be part of a general desire to "advance" in the organization, but the purpose behind the advance is unclear. One associate director with about twelve years' experience in business told us:

I've been with [a large pharmaceutical firm] since college and have worked in several divisions with increasing responsibility. I got grounded in some HR, had roles as compensation and benefits analysts, and then got a generalist opportunity as an HR rep supporting one of our medical device businesses, and from there was promoted to associate manager and then was given an opportunity again as a generalist supporting our logistics. When we closed down some facilities and opened new ones, I had responsibility for that. Once that was done, I had gotten promoted to a manager position. I worked as a manager for a few years, took on additional responsibility for staffing, . . . then took on a role in productivity initiatives in our global group, . . . was the manager supporting that group, and then was promoted again [into the] same kind of role.

When asked how she knew she was ready for the next opportunity, she replied:

It's usually when I'm bored. I'm into a routine, doing the same things, . . . not feeling challenged. You know, you tend to lose focus, you tend to procrastinate a little bit. That means it's time for me to move, time to start looking. [But] for the most part, I was not the driver. I was always [being promoted by supervisors or bidding on openings]. . . . Just this past month, my new boss came looking for me. I wasn't out looking for a job. It was a lateral move, again at the associate director level. I've been jumping around, you know.

One interviewee from an accounting background looked back on his career and saw status as a driving pattern:

I've always felt I've been chasing titles. When I first started off in my business career, I was in a CPA firm. The highest level you could achieve was partner, so I was shooting for partner. After three and a half years, that goal did not seem attainable because the environment was static, [and] the economy wasn't growing. I'd have to wait for a partner to die. So I looked around to find the biggest and best [other] title, and CFO became the goal. I don't think I ever thought of leadership in terms of concern about other people. I thought they were all concerned about getting the titles, too.

Often the basic problem is that an executive position turns out to be primarily a position of leadership, rather than of the kinds of technical skills that played a determining role in elevating an individual into the position. Yet the personal implications of this difference may not be acknowledged. The result, quite often, is that even successful managers and executives grow uncertain. This causes a draining loss of effectiveness and a corresponding loss of commitment to career and organization.

The problem is real. Failing to address it can be destructive not only to yourself but also to your family, your organization, and your co-workers. It is a waste of your good talent, energies, and company resources if you are leading by rote, all the while experiencing an indefinable malaise that stands in the way of full commitment and fulfillment.

Oddly, however, the problem is still largely overlooked by organizations. True, "leadership" in general is a hot topic, and rightly so, discussed and promoted in a flood of journals, books, and training programs that has never been greater. At least one American university offers leadership as an undergraduate major, with courses in motivation, ethics, and systems thinking. Yet leadership is rarely perceived as a calling unto itself, a lifelong vocation as demanding as one's technical specialty.

This aspect of leadership is also overlooked by individuals. At some young moment in your life, you were probably urged to select and develop some area of technical knowledge, but you were probably never urged to select and develop leadership as a special skill or to decide specifically how leadership would fit into your life.

Not until they are in their thirties or forties do many managers confront the issue. By then, they have already made career decisions whose implications they can begin to understand only by sifting through mounds of personal feelings and information, much of it emotional, hazy, incomplete, and even contradictory. And no one offers a system or program through which to sort it out. Meanwhile the pressure and temptation to step into even higher levels of leadership are intense: the pay, the power, the perks.

The failure to weigh the rewards and costs and determine how leadership integrates with all aspects of life presents substantial perils. These affect not only the individual facing the choice but also the people the individual leads. With leadership comes tremendous responsibility for others. Poor decisions and poor fit can severely and negatively affect individuals who look to their leaders for answers. In his book *The Power of Purpose*, Richard Leider (1997) says that people want a "leader who is a source of vision and vitality and who can articulate a common purpose by which they can work" (p. 169). People who aspire to leadership must do so with clear thought and recognition of this responsibility.

We strongly believe there is great value in looking outward at the demands of being a leader today and concurrently looking inward to understand and discover the personal foundations needed for leadership and the likely personal rewards and costs of taking this path.

Stop for a moment to think about your career. At some point in your life, you probably knew and said that you wanted to be an engineer, nurse, retail manager, architect, information specialist, accountant, lawyer, or some other kind of expert. But did you ever say, "I want to be a leader"? If you did, you're rare. If you didn't, you probably moved unconsciously into a career in leadership without ever really examining how happy you would be in it. Try and answer these questions.

Apart from your technical expertise, have you ever thought much about your career as a career in leadership?

Do you think leadership could be a vocation unto itself?

Outside yourself, who around you currently depends on you for inspiration, guidance, direction, or other aspects of leadership?

To what extent do you think about leadership as a responsibility to others?

What does this responsibility mean to you?

Turning Drift into Conscious Choices

We are convinced that many people who are in or are considering leadership roles would benefit from a systematic approach to understanding how their personal nature and motivation align with their roles as leaders. As one executive noted, not many think about a systematic approach:

I don't know how many people really plan their careers in terms of, "OK, I've got this, now I need to do that, now I need to do this so it looks good on my résumé." . . . I think we all come out thinking that because we're eager and willing and everything that it will be fine, that it will just take care of itself.

This book is for leaders and potential leaders who have questions, who are feeling unsure, or who feel they may have drifted into the wrong place. In many cases, leaders aren't aware of what's bothering them about their situation. Is it a lack of personal fit, a question of skill, a family issue, or a matter of personal style and character? What's the best way to sort this out?

In this book, we'll examine the personal side of executive leadership and offer a way for you to confront and deal with your questions. This examination will help you set a direction and limit your drift. It will help you reach the point where, to whatever extent you choose to lead, it will be a conscious, balanced, intentional part of your life. In other words, you will gain more control of your life. The process in this book will help you whether you have been a leader for some years or are just starting out in that direction. We've designed it also to help you whether what you need is mainly a bit of personal confirmation or more extensive support in facing a deeper personal quandary.

Knowing that most current and prospective leaders had never systematically looked within themselves and tried to match their vision, values, and personal assets to an often ill-defined leadership role, we've developed a framework for this process. We'll describe the framework and show how it can help you connect the inner you to your current or prospective leadership roles.

The framework integrates our experience with executives with ideas from colleagues both at the Center for Creative Leadership and in consulting practices. Accompanying the framework is a self-administered assessment process, which you can use to find out what you need to know about yourself in relation to leadership roles. By engaging in this process, you should reach a point where you can say, "I am just not suited to this work" or "Yes, this makes sense to me. I see how I can do this thing and grow with it."

This book is not a quick prescription for getting out of one leadership situation and jumping into another. It intends to help any executive-and anyone who helps executives-ask important questions about how to match and balance their inner passions with their outward executive roles.

Leadership Outside Work

Quite often during our interviews, managers spoke about their leadership roles only in terms of their jobs and organizations. Only a few included their leadership roles away from the office, perhaps as a single parent, community volunteer, fund-raiser, political campaign worker, or member of a rock-climbing club. For one executive, this is where her leadership development began:

When did I start thinking about leadership? It probably dates back to the beginnings of my career, but not so much in my career work as in volunteer work. I took a leadership role in some of the volunteer work that I did at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Natural History, and other volunteer programs-just managing the situation, being responsible for different pieces, getting people to do things. I'm not sure I realized at the time that it was a leadership role. I think I just looked at it as something very organized. And something I'm really good at is organizing and being responsible for getting things done.

Although this book focuses primarily on questions of leadership at work, we urge you to keep in mind that leadership outside work provides wonderful opportunities, and many of the ideas in this book will carry over to non-job-related leadership. Leadership in family and community situations may allow you to try new skills, styles, and levels of responsibility. It often allows more flexibility in terms of the length of time you hold a leading role and how long you choose to do so. For some individuals who love to lead, the best expression of their values may be to remain primarily individual contributors at work and leaders in a non-work setting.

FOCUS ON FIVE SIGNIFICANT AREAS

The framework will help you organize your thinking and logically connect important career issues with leadership development activities. As shown in Figure 1.1, it is organized around five important topics:

1. Changing context and demands. What is the context of your current or potential leadership role? What special expectations and realities do leaders face today? What views of leadership prevail in your current situation, and what assumptions about leadership do you personally hold?
2. Vision. What is your own personal vision, and is leadership a part of that vision? Do you also have your own leadership vision?
3. Values. Are your personal and leadership visions based on your own core values?
4. Self-awareness. What personal qualities support your work as a leader and give your work its own distinctive style?
5. Balance. Do you have adequate balance and focus in your life, resulting from a good integration between your leadership work and other aspects of your life?

Context and expectations, vision, values, self-awareness, and personal balance-these five topics frame the deep personal self-assessment that this book is all about. And we place special emphasis on vision because we find that while executives can usually articulate what is important to them, their leadership strengths, and their developmental needs, they often fail to recognize that these are all part of an overall vision. We believe that being purposeful about what you want in life is important to being purposeful about what you want in your leadership situation. Without an articulate personal vision, you will have a difficult time evaluating the leadership choices presented to you.

We also believe that everyone operates by a vision, whether they realize it or not. Recognizing and acting on one's vision is more than important: it's crucial. For some

individuals, the challenge is mainly finding the time to uncover some fairly accessible truths. For others, it's a more arduous task.

The five topics are closely related. External realities and expectations provide a context for operationalizing your personal and leadership visions. Your values and how you play them out in your everyday life are the concrete representations of vision. Self-awareness, too, must be tied back to vision as a sort of catalyst, or glue, if you will. Does what you do reflect who you are and where you want to go? Similarly, your personal vision derives from the many facets of your life. Therefore, life integration is crucial, and life balance can only be judged in the context of your own personal vision and values. Because all of these concepts are related, a major theme in this book will be making more conscious, unifying connections.

This concept of five significant areas isn't new or exotic. Nor is our purpose to convince you that we've made the latest "cutting-edge" discovery in the science of leadership. This book is not so much about cutting edges as it is about the personal power that drives the blade. As Kevin Cashman (1998, p. 18) says, "We lead by virtue of who we are. . . . Whether we are at an early stage in our career, a knowledge worker, or a corporate executive, we are CEOs of our own lives."

AN ONGOING PROCESS

We hope to help you construct a personal approach that you can use now and also at a later stage in your career, not to push you into a change. In fact, this book might resoundingly confirm that you've already found a good path. Some people find that moderate-sized changes can be made right in their present positions or in their off-the-job lives, with important changes in attitude. Even if a major change seems called for, now may simply not be the right time. If, for example, you are carrying a heavy mortgage, you have two children in college, and you have considerable medical bills, it might be foolhardy to risk your current professional position—although even then in some cases the risk might be in order.

The framework is meant to help you discern an overall pattern in your work life that relates to a personal call to leadership. It should help you become aware of what's important to you and help you manage your career more actively. Perhaps when the time is right you can use this information to alter your circumstances. Deciding when that time comes may require using the framework at several future moments.

What you ultimately decide to do about leadership is, of course, your own decision. Choices depend on what's available, your level of excitement and discomfort, your chances to express yourself better in your current position or elsewhere, the supports at hand, courage, insight, and perhaps luck. There are no perfect outcomes.

WHAT'S TO COME

Each of the next five chapters covers one of the topics in the framework.

Chapter Two, "Consider the Current Realities and Expectations," looks at the changing context of leadership and changing conceptions of what leaders are and do. It's mainly about external expectations and realities. It discusses recent rapid economic and social changes that are affecting leadership at every level. It poses such questions as "What do you see happening out there in the turbulent world of organizations?" "What impact do these changes have on leadership?" and "What forces are shaping your current feelings

about being a leader? Do they present opportunities for you to develop as a leader?"

Chapter Three, "Ground Your Leadership Vision in Personal Vision," explores the necessary relationship between personal vision and effective leadership. In the view of many, a person without a clear vision cannot lead a group or organization anywhere. The chapter will raise questions such as "Do you work from a vision that provides meaning, purpose, energy, and passion to yourself and others?" and "How does your leadership vision mesh with your broader personal vision?"

Chapter Four, "Base Your Leadership Values on Personal Values," asks you to inventory your values to see how they are currently reflected in your life and how strongly they serve as a basis for leadership. The chapter will also help you uncover any conflicts or disconnects that might interfere with your work in leadership. The chapter will raise such questions as "What are your core values?" "Are they realistic and reflected in your actual behaviors?" and "What other values define and support your work as a leader?"

Chapter Five, "Get to Know Yourself as a Leader," discusses the importance of being aware of your own particular skills and qualities related to leadership work. It leads you through an inventory of leadership competencies, roles, traits, learning styles, responses to change, and knowledge based on your business experiences. The chapter will help you pinpoint talents and skills where you show strength and others where you may want to improve. The chapter will also draw connections between your self-awareness and your ability as a leader to build trust, be flexible, and forge teams.

Chapter Six, "Balance Your Work Life and Your Personal Life," provides perspectives on the impact of a leadership role on the other aspects of your life. It suggests ways in which your life at home and at work can be mutually supportive. It asks questions such as "Do you look at your life as a matter of sacrificing time in one domain (such as your work life) in order to have time for other domains (such as family or community life)? Or can you look at it more in terms of integrating across different domains?" "Given your vision and values, what's the right balance or integration between work, home, and other interests?" and "How successful is your current balance? What might need to change?" The chapter provides some useful strategies for dealing with this difficult problem.

Chapter Seven, "Take Steps Toward Self-Aware Leadership," pulls together key themes from the earlier chapters. It gives you a process for integrating discoveries made throughout the book, culminating in a few key themes and insights that can clarify and drive any future decisions regarding leadership in your career. It will also discuss how to get help from colleagues, family, networks, and mentors.

Appendix A contains a copy of the questionnaire that we used to survey the thirty-two Leadership Development Program participants on their views of leadership and career. Appendix B lists books, articles, and instruments to consult for additional information.

THE EXERCISES

Each chapter contains numerous leadership-related questions and exercises that we have found helpful to executives. Not every exercise or question will be right for you, so be selective. But also be disciplined about tackling exercises that will challenge and stretch you. We've developed the exercises to serve a range of personal needs and styles. Give your major time and attention to the ones that work best for you.

You will get the most out of this book if you allow yourself the time not only to think

about the questions that it raises but also to write down your responses. Writing is a way of sorting out your thoughts.

By writing down your thoughts, you will also prepare yourself to compare your current conclusions with new thoughts that you may arrive at in the future. Your ideas will certainly change as your career in leadership develops. A benchmark now may be useful to you in the future.

For some exercises, it will be possible for you to respond by writing your thoughts directly in the space provided on the page. You may want to make enlargements of some pages to give yourself more room to write. Or you may want to do all your writing in a separate notebook or journal. For some exercises, you may find it more convenient to type your thoughts. Record your thoughts with the method or combination of methods that works best for you.

Keep in mind that you are not simply following our line of questioning but developing your own, more personalized tool that can be useful to you at more than one stage in your career.

SUMMARY AND SYNTHESIS

Through systematic self-assessment, you can gain greater mastery over the leadership aspects of your career and your life as a whole. You can also overcome some of the passivity that has perhaps led you to a position of leadership that you never made a decision to enter and where you may now feel less than fulfilled.

This book will help you explore and synthesize ideas about the five closely related themes in our framework: external realities, vision, values, self-awareness, and balance.

If a leadership career is what you want, you'll benefit by becoming more aware of how your personal vision, goals, and other aspects of your life can enhance or direct your choices. You can master a career choice in leadership.

Respond to the following questions by writing in the space provided or in a separate journal.

1. What kinds of questions about leadership have you had?

2. Are you facing any immediate decisions about your leadership role?

3. How do you plan to use this book? How do you envision this book being helpful to you?

4. If you are currently acting as a leader, officially or unofficially, what do you enjoy about it?

5. What do you not enjoy about it?

6. What thinking have you done about yourself and leadership as a career? What goals do you have for yourself as a leader?
