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INTRODUCTION: GETTING EXTRAORDINARY THINGS DONE IN ORGANIZATIONS

The Student Leadership Challenge is about how student leaders *mobilize others to want to get extraordinary things done* in organizations. It's about the practices they use to transform values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, separateness into solidarity, and risks into rewards. It's about leadership that creates the climate in which challenging opportunities are transformed into remarkable successes.

There are no shortages of challenging opportunities. Although in these extraordinary times the challenges seem only to be increasing in number and complexity, all generations confront their own serious threats and receive their own favorable circumstances. The abundance of challenges, however, is not the issue; it's how you respond to them that matters. Through your responses you have the potential to either seriously worsen or profoundly improve the world in which you live, study, and work.

The most significant contribution student leaders make is not simply to today's issues and goals but rather to the long-term development of people, communities, and institutions so they can adapt, change, prosper, and grow. The domain of leaders is the future, and leadership is not the private reserve of a few charismatic men and women. It is a process ordinary people use when they are bringing forth the best from themselves and others. When the leader in everyone is liberated, extraordinary things happen.

Leadership is a process. It is a journey, not a single destination, and the conclusion of any successful (even extraordinary) endeavor is simply the beginning point for the next adventure. Meeting the leadership challenge is a personal—and a daily—challenge for all of us. In the final analysis, leadership development is self-development. We know that if you have the will and the way to lead, you can. You have to supply the will. *The Student Leadership Challenge* will supply the way.

YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The fundamental purpose of *The Student Leadership Challenge* is to assist students—whether in a formal or official leadership position or not—in furthering their abilities to lead others to get extraordinary things done. You are capable of developing yourself as a leader far more than tradition has ever assumed possible.

***Some people make things happen,
some watch things happen, while others
wonder what has happened.***

—Gaelic proverb

Our findings from the analysis of thousands of personal-best leadership case studies challenge the myth that leadership is something that you find only at the highest levels of organizations and society. We found it everywhere. These findings also challenge the belief that leadership is reserved for only a handful of very special people. Leadership is not a gene or an inheritance. Leadership is an identifiable set of skills and abilities that are available to everyone. The “great person” theory of leadership is just plain wrong. Or, we should say, the theory that there are only a few select men and women who can lead others to greatness is just plain wrong.

Another notion that is plain wrong is that leaders come only from large, or great, or small, or breakthrough organizations, or from established economies, or from start-up companies. They come from anywhere and everywhere. We consider the male and female students in our research to be exemplary leaders, and so do those with whom they worked, even though the vast majority of them aren’t known outside of their colleges or communities. They are the everyday heroes of our world. It’s because there are so many—not so few—student leaders that extraordinary things get done on a regular basis, especially in extraordinary times.

The Student Leadership Challenge is written both to strengthen your abilities and to uplift your spirits. We intend it to be practical and inspirational. We also make you a promise: Everything in this book is evidence-based. Everything we write about, everything we advise is solidly based in research—our own and others’. If you engage in the practices

we describe in this book, you will improve your performance and the performance of your team. There is a catch, of course. You have to do it with commitment and consistency. Excellence in anything—whether it’s leadership, music, sports, or academics—requires disciplined practice.

Practice is the best of all instructors.

—Pubilius Syrus

This book has its origins in a research project we began over twenty-five years ago. We wanted to know what people did—from teenagers to executives to senior citizens, from the campus to the corner office, from Main Street to Tiananmen Square—when they were at their “personal best” in leading others. The personal bests were experiences in which our study respondents, in their own estimation, set their individual leadership standards of excellence. We started with an assumption that we didn’t have to interview and survey star performers or top executives in excellent companies to discover best practices. Instead, we assumed that by asking regular people to describe extraordinary leadership experiences we would find patterns of success. And we did.

We repeated this research with student leaders, and we found exactly the same thing. When they are doing their best, student leaders exhibit an identifiable set of practices, which vary little from campus to campus—whether small or large, public or private, northern or southern, rural or urban—or even from community to community and country to country. Good leadership is an understandable and universal process. Though each student leader is a unique individual, there are shared patterns to the practice of leadership. And these practices can be learned.

This book is about how college students exercise leadership at its best. The stories you will read are the real-life experiences of regular students,

***The formula for success is simple:
practice and concentration, then more
practice and more concentration.***

—Babe Didrikson Zaharias

from all walks of life—people like you—who get bigger-than-life results.* This is not a book about famous people or about people in positions of high power—although we have peppered the text with short quotations from such people in a variety of fields to give you a look at leadership through some different lenses. It’s a book about students who have the courage and spirit to make a significant difference.

One of the most dangerous and irresponsible myths about leadership is that it is the province of just a handful of people, a magical ability reserved for the unique individuals of fairy tales or science fiction novels. Leadership is not something mysterious, mystical, or ethereal that cannot be understood, learned, and practiced by ordinary people. It is a myth that only a lucky few can decipher the leadership code. You have within you the ability to accept and embrace the leadership challenge to make a difference, because it is who you are and what you do that matters.

A FIELD GUIDE FOR LEADERS

The student leaders we’ve worked with and learned from have asked us many questions about enhancing their leadership capabilities. In *The*

* Unless otherwise noted, all student stories, examples, and quotations are taken from personal interviews and correspondence or from personal-best leadership case studies written by student leaders during or shortly after their college careers. In reporting their leadership experiences, we do not specify their school or location because The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership hold true for the complete range of campus environments—large and small, private and public, urban and rural—in the United States and abroad.

Student Leadership Challenge, we offer guidance on these and other questions:

- What beliefs and values guide my actions as a leader?
- What is the source of self-confidence required to lead others?
- How do I best set an example for others?
- How do I articulate a vision of the future when things are so unpredictable?
- How do I improve my ability to get people excited?
- How do I create an environment that promotes innovation and risk?
- How do I build a cohesive and spirited team?
- How do I share power and information and still maintain accountability?
- How do I put more joy and celebration into our efforts?
- How do I improve my leadership abilities?

Think of *The Student Leadership Challenge* as a field guide to take along on your leadership journey. You begin the expedition with this chapter and the next. This introduction gives you a point of view about leadership; Chapter Two provides an overview of The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership[®] revealed in our research. Chapters Three through Seven explore The Five Practices in depth. We have designed each of those chapters to describe one leadership practice and explain the essential behaviors that student leaders employ to get extraordinary things done (what we refer to as The Ten Commitments of Leadership). We offer evidence from our research, and that of others, to support the practices and commitments, recount actual case examples of real students who demonstrate each practice, and prescribe specific recommendations on what you can do to make each practice your own and to continue your development as a leader.

It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.

—John Wooden

Along the way we suggest steps to take, alone or with others, to build specific skills in becoming a better leader. Each of our suggestions is a “small win.” Whether the focus is your own learning or the development of your constituents you can take immediate action on every one of the recommendations. They require little or no budget; they don’t need any elaborate or extensive discussions, consensus among peers, or approval of some professor, faculty advisor, or college administrator. They just require your personal commitment and discipline.

The closing chapter sounds a call to action, a call to everyone to accept personal responsibility to be a role model for leadership. Among the recurring lessons from the research is this: leadership is everyone’s business, and the first place to look for leadership is within yourself. The closing chapter asks you to consider the difference you want to make, the legacy you want to leave. And when you read to the very end of this book, the secret to success in life will be revealed.

