

CHAPTER 1

# My Personal Leadership Story

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Great leaders aren't born; they are made—made and shaped by their experiences. Gandhi's mother was very religious and influenced by Jainism, a religion founded on the idea of nonviolence toward all creatures. A village schoolteacher refused to teach a young Susan B. Anthony long division because she was a girl. Margaret Thatcher gained experience weathering criticism when, as education minister in the early 1970s, budget cuts earned her the nickname the “milk snatcher.” When Richard Branson was about seven years old, his mother, Eve, left him three miles away from his home on the way back from school so he would be forced to figure out how to get home on his own. She did it to help him overcome his crippling shyness. It took him 10 hours, but he did it and it helped him become the person and the leader he is today.

Like Gandhi, Anthony, Thatcher, and Branson, every leader has a story. But most leaders aren't fully aware of how their experiences have shaped them to be the leaders they are now. I believe it's crucial for leaders to take time to think about their history and their personal leadership story.

Take a moment to think of the key experiences that have shaped you as a leader. I hope some stories are already coming to mind for you. Some will be stories of peak experiences when you had a significant impact, when you were at your best. Others will be more negative—moments when you struggled, when your personal resolve was tested. Reflecting on all of these moments of leadership will give you a clearer vision of who you are as a leader and why you lead the way you do.

I have seen it hundreds of times in my work. In leadership development programs, I like to take people through an exercise that helps them build a Personal Leadership Timeline: a list of the key experiences, both positive and negative, they believe have shaped

them as leaders. These stories can come from childhood, school, work, or life in a community. This kind of personal reflection is easier for some people than for others, but everyone I have worked with has come away from this exercise with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and commitment for their leadership roles.

My own leadership story is based on several critical experiences. I'm going to share my story with you because it's important for you to understand where the ideas in this book come from and because I hope it will help you reflect on your own personal leadership story.

## **Is Leadership Worth Dying For?**

Most leaders don't ever have to ask themselves this question. I faced it in my very first full-time job.

Do you remember how you felt when you first started your working life? If you were like me, you wanted to change the world, to really show the value you could bring to an organization. I got a job with a large public sector organization that helped some of the neediest people in society, providing financial support and services to help people get back to school or find a job.

Most of my colleagues were nice people. They were very dedicated to their clients. But they weren't that dedicated to the organization. Most showed up at 8:30 AM and left at 4:30 PM sharp every single day. Maybe they had been turned off by the bland working environment. Everything in the office was beige—the walls, the floors, even the desks and chairs. Even the people seemed beige—or at least bland.

The supervisors and managers were decent individuals, too, but they weren't very inspiring. They did what they were told. They respected the hierarchy and their place in it. Senior management seemed distant. Few employees had direct access to them, and as far as I could tell, they didn't have much impact on the organization.

A month after I started, I was already wondering whether this was really the place for me.

You see, I had done what I was supposed to do. I went to college, got good grades, and landed a solid full-time job. All I had to do now was to be loyal, and the organization would take care of me until I retired. This was to the old-fashioned concept known as job security. But I was realizing it wasn't enough to build a career on. I wanted not just to have an impact on my clients' lives but to make a difference to the organization as a whole. This was the moment I learned how much the culture of an organization can undermine an employee's sense of engagement.

Things improved a little when I started working as a career counselor. This role was better aligned with my own interests in not just giving a handout but in giving a hand up. I started to feel like I was running a new business within a large organization. I soon learned I had a strong entrepreneurial side. I was a builder—not a maintainer.

My work got the attention of a senior manager named Zinta. She was a quiet and reserved person whom I had only known from a distance. She started coming by my office to talk about my work and the new programs I was building. In those discussions, I told her some of my ideas for improving our work environment. One day, she said, "We need someone like you in management. You're a big-picture thinker. You have a strategic mind and know how to get things done. This would really help our management team."

Nobody had ever said anything like that to me before. As a result of that conversation, I began to think about myself differently. I began reading books on management. I wanted to learn more about what Zinta saw in me.

A few weeks later Zinta dropped by my office again. This time she shared with me an idea she had. She suspected that I wanted to have a greater impact on the organization, and I agreed. She then told me she was setting up a committee to find ways to make our

work environment more positive. She asked if I would be interested in helping her out, and I jumped at the opportunity.

Much to my surprise, as the work of our committee began to take effect, things actually started to improve. Employees became more enthusiastic. The organization was starting to feel more positive. Everyone was more engaged. You could feel the changes starting to happen in that place. While the walls, floors, and desks were still beige in color, the workplace had more life and vitality. This was the moment I learned that the culture of an organization could be changed for the better, and that one person could make a difference. That person was Zinta.

Things were going pretty well for me. My job was fulfilling. The work environment was more positive and energizing. I was feeling like I was having a real impact. Then disaster struck. Zinta was diagnosed with lung cancer and she had to leave immediately to start treatment.

She was gone for several months. And as soon as she left, the changes we worked so hard to create began to slip away. Upper management disbanded the committee Zinta had started. They told those of us on Zinta's committee to focus on doing our own jobs and to leave the organizational stuff to them. Those of us who worked with Zinta started to be passed up for promotions. I was told I didn't have what it took to be a manager. My engagement eroded even further. I was frustrated, but even more than that, I was confused. I couldn't understand why upper management wouldn't want us to create a better work environment. Plus, I was getting some seriously mixed messages about my future with the organization.

As the weeks passed, I heard that things weren't looking good for Zinta, so I decided to visit her at home. As I approached her porch, I could see her waiting for me behind the screen door. I immediately saw that the disease was getting the best of her. My heart sank.

I had brought her a fruit basket, and she thanked me. She offered me some tea, and we sat down and started talking about her

treatments. She seemed defiant and confident in her ability to fight her disease, but she quickly changed the subject. She wanted to know how I was doing. At first, I kept things superficial; I was there to talk about her. But she kept pressing, so I opened up and shared my experiences, my frustration, and my confusion.

Then she started talking. She began to confide in me and told story after story of her experiences as a manager. She described at length the petty office politics, the discouraging atmosphere, and the lack of genuine trust among her fellow managers. She described her regular battles with upper management, who resisted her every effort to make the organization better. I could feel her anguish and sense of disappointment. Then she said something that took me by surprise. She said, “You know, Vince, I’ve always taken care of my health. I’ve never smoked a cigarette in my life, and I have no history of lung cancer in my family. I believe the disease I’m fighting today is a direct result of all the stress I have experienced being a manager in this organization.”

I was stunned. As I left Zinta’s house I grieved for her. I felt angry about why she had to endure what she did. As the days passed, I couldn’t get Zinta’s words out of my mind. I started to wonder what they meant to me and whether I would ever be prepared to pay the price she had paid.

Two weeks after my visit I received an envelope in the mail from Zinta. When I opened it, I found a card thanking me for the visit and the fruit basket. There was also a letter folded inside, and here’s what it said:

*Vince,*

*I understand you may have received a mixed message recently regarding your objectives. Success is a funny thing. Like physics, every action has a positive and negative reaction. On one hand, success has the effect of giving one a sense of achievement, pride in the accomplishment, affirmation of skills, and promotes a desire to expand to the next horizon.*

*The other side is the reaction from others. Some will rejoice in your achievements. Others, perhaps because of their own insecurities, will feel threatened. These people will inadvertently or purposefully make moves to discourage you, undercut the significance of your success, or redirect you to paths that are less threatening to them. Some people are jealous of others' success. (Why does he get all the "breaks"?) Little do they realize that opportunities exist for everyone.*

*The choice remains yours. Which of the above will influence you? I encourage you to always be the best you can be and take advantage of opportunities as you find them. You have everything to gain.*

*Hope this helps,  
Zinta*

When I think about what it means to be a leader, I think about Zinta and her letter. In the midst of her struggle to survive, she took the time to reach out to a young colleague who needed some encouragement.

Zinta died two weeks after I received this letter, and the organization died along with her. That was the moment I learned that although one leader can make a difference, one lone leader can't sustain culture change on his or her own. Weeks and months after, I reflected on Zinta and her experience. I had many questions. Was her cancer really a result of the stress she endured in that organization? I don't know for sure. But she believed it was so strongly that it must have had some effect on her health.

If things were so bad for her, why didn't she just leave? Over the years, I've been surprised to find how many leaders have lived in working environments almost as bad as the one Zinta put up with. I also discovered the one common factor—they were all baby boomers. I learned that this generation grew up expecting to persevere and put up with whatever they had to, no matter how bad it was. So if you worked for a boss who was a jerk, you put up

with it. If you worked in a dreadful work environment, like Zinta did, you put up with it. In a weird sort of way, putting up with all the bullshit was like a badge of honor for many boomers.

I knew I was wired differently than Zinta. That letter forced me to reflect very early on in my career on two important questions: What is leadership, and is it worth dying for?

I learned from Zinta's example that I wasn't prepared to sacrifice the way she had, not for an organization that didn't deserve it—not for an organization that didn't aspire to greatness. An organization like that doesn't deserve the commitment and energy of its employees. That was as clear to me 25 years ago as it is today.

Zinta's experience also taught me that there isn't an artificial division between our work lives and our personal lives. We each have one life, and there's no reason to spend it in a dreadful organization led by uninspiring managers and leaders. Moreover, for most of us, our work is a big part of our lives. We spend a lot of time at work, and for the majority of us it's the main way we contribute to society. So I believe it's critical that we make it the best experience we can. And if we do, we all win—employees, customers, shareholders, our families, and our communities. Organizations make our world work. We need them to be strong and vibrant, not uninspiring and soul-destroying. And it all begins with leadership.

At the time I worked with Zinta, people didn't really talk about leadership. It was all about management, and being a good manager was about doing what you were told and ruffling as few feathers as possible. Twenty-five years after Zinta died, I've decided to start sharing her story because I believe we need to do a lot better when it comes to leadership.

Zinta's letter changed the way I thought about my life's work. It also changed my life in a more practical sense: It inspired me to start my own consulting business. I didn't realize it then, but Zinta challenged me to make a critical decision—a leadership decision.

What I also didn't realize at the time was that the moment I made that decision, I began a quest: *to learn how we can create*

*compelling organizations with leaders who truly inspire others to succeed.* I wanted to find and work with like-minded individuals who aspired to create something special in the organizations they led. Unfortunately, finding those people would not be easy.

When I started my consulting business, I focused on providing private career counseling services to professionals. My work with these clients was gratifying. They began to invite me into their organizations to deliver workshops for their employees. I quickly found I enjoyed that work even more. I also learned that although career counseling let me have an impact at an individual level, leading seminars gave me the opportunity to have an organizational impact. This really appealed to me. And over time, I began to shift my business, relying less on the individual career counseling and more on the work I did inside organizations.

All the projects I worked on had one thing in common: change. I continually worked with organizations, individual leaders, teams, and business units that needed to change but didn't know how. I learned that even people and groups who want change tend to resist it.

As my work grew more complex and strategic in nature, I decided I needed to learn more about organizational development, leadership, and change. This is when I began to pursue my graduate degrees. I kept running my business while I was in school, and I found being part of these two worlds fascinating. Often the two worlds came together. I would be reading about leadership theories and then testing them out with my clients. I learned which ideas really were valuable and which were theoretically interesting but not connected to the real world. This was the moment I learned to always favor practical, actionable ideas.

My graduate courses made me think about my client work differently. I started to see organizations in a more systemic way. The more I learned, the more I could see what got in the way of organizations' success. I started to focus on what has become the central theme of my career: holistic ways of thinking about business

and leadership. My professors were mainly focused on holistic thinking in education, but I was kind of a misfit in my courses. I was self-employed, working with private sector organizations, while my fellow students worked in education, health care, or the public sector. This was the moment I learned that exposure to ideas from other fields can be immensely valuable. Being a misfit is perfectly fine; in fact, it may help you in ways you don't even appreciate at first. I eventually did my doctoral research on what I termed *holistic leadership*. I found leaders who shared a common way of thinking about leadership and how to build compelling organizations. They became my research participants and my teachers. They became my beacon for hope.

I needed that hope, because my quest to work with leaders who aspired to greatness was starting to feel a little naïve.

## **Why Are Some Leaders Such Jerks?**

I worked with one company led by a chief executive officer (CEO) who someone described to me as the “classic asshole.” Larry was a savvy business leader, but he was also an arrogant and pompous individual. To make matters worse, he used fear and intimidation as his primary approach to leadership. People in that organization said that every time they interacted with Larry, they left feeling demeaned and deflated.

Human resources (HR) brought me in to run a leadership development program for mid-level and senior leaders. Larry was in one of my initial interviews, and I remember that within five minutes he set an adversarial tone. He went on a rant trashing HR and made it clear he was just putting up with this program. He didn't believe they needed it. When I asked him to describe his approach to leadership, he said quite simply, “It's easy. Fear. Your people have to fear you if you're going to be effective.”

Once I started running the program, a lot of people wanted to talk about Larry. His senior leaders struggled with his style, but he

was the boss. I told them that they had a responsibility to give Larry honest feedback. It would help him become a better leader. But nobody wanted to speak up. So they put up with him, and Larry continued to be the classic asshole.

I ended up working with this organization through one of the biggest crises they had ever faced. A major supplier went through a nine-month strike, crippling my client. However, the leaders really stepped up and kept the organization going. They were struggling. They didn't achieve their financial goals, a failure they weren't used to. But they managed to keep the company profitable, which was an amazing accomplishment in light of the crisis.

The leaders I worked with felt pretty good about themselves after the crisis was over. The company even got positive media attention for the way they managed the situation. I also saw how the leaders came to trust one another more and work together better. It was an important insight: Adversity can tear you apart or make you stronger. In this case, it made the leaders stronger.

Unfortunately, about a week after the crisis was over, the senior leadership had a meeting with Larry. They were all expecting him to congratulate them for managing so well. Well, he didn't. He told them they were lucky to pull through, and he proceeded to point out all the times they had dropped the ball during the strike. When I talked to the leaders about this meeting, some of them had tears in their eyes. I heard them out and then asked, "Why didn't any of you stand up to Larry?" Complete silence filled the room.

I told them that leaders need to have the courage to call out bad behavior, no matter where it comes from. It's about speaking truth to power. It's not easy, but it is necessary at times. They told me that no one stood up because they were afraid—afraid of what Larry could do, afraid that they would lose their jobs. I felt for them. It was difficult to watch grown men and women talk about being belittled like that.

I felt obligated to talk to Larry about his behavior, but I knew he would retaliate. He would end my contract, but that didn't

bother me. I was more concerned that if I confronted him, he would make things worse for his leaders and I didn't want that to happen. Things were already bad enough for them. My contact in HR told me not to bother. He said the leaders would have to come to terms with Larry in their own ways. And over the next few months, they did—a few of them resigned, but most just put their heads down and kept putting up with it.

This experience weighed on me for quite a while. I kept asking myself what I could have done differently. But in the end, the real questions were: Why do organizations put up with leaders like Larry? Why does it seem that there are so many people like him out there? What are they trying to achieve? That company was very successful; it is possible to drive success through fear and intimidation, but that strategy can only get you so far. Leaders like Larry get the worst of their people. They waste the human potential of their teams. So much potential is left unrealized. So much potential is destroyed.

This is the moment I learned that to change organizations, you need a little bit of naïve optimism. You have to believe in the potential of leaders and employees and what they can do to create great organizations. However, great leaders and great organizations are unfortunately the exception. The real work is in helping all those other leaders and organizations to be better. My personal resolve got stronger. I became even more committed to my quest.

## **Why Are Many Leaders So Lame?**

A little later in my career, I worked with a technology company whose founder and CEO, Jim, was a brilliant guy. He designed software for the financial services industry, and he was successful within this niche. Customers came knocking on his door. His company grew quickly. But as a leader, he was a little rough around the edges. He could be hard on his people, but everyone knew his intentions were good, so it didn't bother them that much.

By the time I was brought in to build a leadership program, the company was struggling. New competitors had entered the market, and the company's software was starting to look dated. They had become complacent. Success had made them lazy. Talking to employees in the company, I learned that product development staff never talked to those in marketing, and marketing staff never talked to those in sales. Sales leaders were in the field promising release dates for new versions of the software, creating customer demand for a product that nobody was actually building inside the organization. It was a mess.

The leadership forums I designed and ran were difficult meetings. The leaders only wanted to sit around and blame one another for the company's problems. They were too focused on their own small silos—they weren't operating as a whole unit.

When the business had been doing well, the dysfunction didn't seem to matter—everything was easy. Cash kept streaming into the company. However, success can create a false sense of security and a false sense of how good you really are. That's what happened here and that's when I learned that the numbers don't always tell the whole story.

Now that sales were lagging, everyone had noticed the cultural and organizational problems, but nobody knew what to do about them. Jim was at a loss, and the other leaders were stressed out, realizing that they were the ones who were going to have to figure out how to save the company. They were all under great pressure to turn things around. But they weren't responding. They were inept. They were helpless.

One day after a meeting with this group, I went to the parking lot and put my computer bag and materials in my car. As I went to shut the trunk, I looked up at the client's office building. I saw the floors where my client had offices. I pictured all those leaders who spent all their time fighting with one another, and then I pictured all the other floors with other companies in that office building,

each one playing out its own self-created drama. It was only from outside the building that you could see how small those fights were, how much they distracted everyone and how much they got in the way of success. This is when I began to understand that to create a strong organizational culture, you need to begin with a strong leadership culture.

In my experience, many organizations had pretty weak leadership cultures. Some were even dreadful and others were completely dysfunctional. What's important to understand is that they were made that way, often by default because a few leaders paid attention to this thing called leadership culture.

However, I did find that there were a few truly exceptional leaders that had figured it out. They deliberately built strong leadership cultures in the organizations that they led. I was fortunate to work with a few of those leaders. They showed me that leadership culture can be a powerful and positive force in organizations. But it is also fragile. And the moment you stop paying attention to it, things can begin to erode.

In the end, I also learned that we all have a choice. We don't have to put up with uninspiring or toxic leadership cultures. We can create great ones. But it takes concerted effort to build and sustain them over the long term. It means you have to be relentlessly focused on keeping the cultures strong. It all begins with an aspiration for great leadership.

At that point in my journey, I also thought a lot about the quest I was on. I realized that as a consultant, I would always be on the sidelines, helping my clients but not really creating cultures myself. I enjoyed consulting, but I wanted to help build a business, too. I didn't just want to be a leadership expert—I wanted to be a leader. So I decided that I needed to go back into an organization, to take everything I learned from 10 years of consulting work, my graduate programs, and my research, and see if I could actually make a strong leadership culture happen within a company.

## **Has Anyone Noticed That We've Stopped Talking about Our Values?**

I never would have expected that my next opportunity would emerge so quickly. I was approached by a search firm to consider a role with a new start-up pharmaceutical company. The CEO, John, was an industry veteran. He had left a senior marketing job with a top-tier pharmaceutical company to start this new venture. He also had a vision for creating a different kind of pharmaceutical company.

John had a great vision for the culture he wanted to create, and it was distilled in five core values. These really attracted me to the organization. I decided to make the leap and became responsible for leading the learning and leadership function. It was a great experience with a great group of people. I had the opportunity that I was looking for: to go into a company and set my ideas into action. The good news was that John (and everyone else) wasn't looking for the same old ways of working.

As a new company, we were pushing ourselves to think and act differently in all areas of our business. One of the things John taught me was a very subtle and important insight about leadership. John always believed that many leaders never really understand how a company actually makes money. He thought that was the cornerstone of all leadership, because once you understand that basic fundamental, it then drives all your behavior as a leader. This time is when I began to learn about the deep connection between strategy and leadership.

Over the three years I was there, a subtle change took place in the conversations we were having about our company. In the early days we spent a lot of time talking about our values and the kind of culture we wanted to create. We were very successful at doing that. But then we stopped having those discussions.

Once in an all-staff meeting I shared my personal observation, "Has anyone noticed that we've stopped talking about our values?"

It was a question that resonated with many. What I would learn later when I was back in consulting was that organizations tend to do this. Values and culture are closely connected to each other. Companies sometimes treat them as a project, something to be checked off the list. I would see this faulty thinking over and over again. Culture building isn't a onetime project or a simple to-do item; rather, it's never ending. You have to constantly work on it. If you don't, it will begin to erode.

Although my experience at this company was great and my team and I accomplished some really good things, I still felt I was not fully involved in the business. As a leader of a support function, I still felt one step removed from truly being involved. In just three years, I had already started to move into maintenance mode, and I knew that wasn't where I excelled. It was time to move on.

All along, the spirit of Zinta was still present as my inspiration. Then the chance I was really looking for finally arrived. I joined another consulting firm that was soon acquired by a new company called Knightsbridge Human Capital Solutions.

## **How Do You Create a Vibrant Culture?**

Knightsbridge was founded by David Shaw, a seasoned business leader who had a strong track record as a corporate CEO. David had an idea: He wanted to give organizations a more integrated way to address their human capital needs at every stage, from recruitment, selection, and talent attraction to employee and leadership development. Optimizing the productivity of their people and addressing their career management and outplacement needs were also concerns. His idea was ambitious but untested. David also stressed the importance of not only building a great professional services firm but also becoming a great operating company. This dual part of our vision created a healthy tension in our organization. However, David and the rest of the Knightsbridge employees were committed to making this goal a reality.

All of this work was exciting enough, but even better, David didn't just talk about the business model he envisioned; he also talked about building a vibrant company culture. He knew that both would be critical to our success. And I knew that my vision of an integrated leadership practice would help play a role in making his overall vision a reality. I had found my opportunity to be the leader and put all my ideas about leadership and culture in place both within my business and externally with our clients.

Building a different type of consulting firm like Knightsbridge started with hiring a different kind of person. We wanted people who naturally focused on serving clients. We needed people who could put their egos aside and who could be polished, yet down to earth. They needed to be smart but humble, passionate but not willing to let the ends justify the means. They needed to be optimists. And because we wanted to grow quickly, we needed people who were subject matter experts but who also had an entrepreneurial, risk-taking spirit. We named this unique set of qualities the K-Factor,<sup>1</sup> and I've always made the K-Factor a priority for myself as a leader and within my own practice area of Knightsbridge.

I've learned that for any organization, the culture is both what binds you together and what propels you forward—but only if you get it right. If you don't, your culture becomes your fatal flaw. What I also learned was that, for a professional services business like Knightsbridge, culture has a real impact on the customer's experience.

In my time at Knightsbridge, I held several roles of increasing responsibility. Then in July 2008, I was given the opportunity I was looking for: David asked me to lead a new Leadership Practice. My job was to integrate three existing and separate businesses and redefine how we went to market. It was a great opportunity, and I immediately noticed something in me begin to change. As an executive I now felt a greater sense of responsibility and accountability—more than at any other time in my career. I felt a direct obligation to our shareholders and board. I felt an even

greater sense of accountability to our customers and employees. I was thrilled to have such an exciting opportunity to take on—but I also knew it would take hard work to succeed. I knew this move was a personal turning point for me.

But something happened in July of that year that would truly test my leadership: the financial crisis of 2007–2008.

As my team and I were busy working to redefine the Knightsbridge Leadership business, some of our clients began to put leadership projects on hold. They, like every other company, were struggling for their survival. Yet, during this time, I also had other clients respond very differently to the same conditions. Although they too were affected by the financial crisis, they didn't put leadership development on hold. In fact, they invested in it even more. They realized that to weather this crisis, their leaders would need to be at their strongest, and the organization needed to support them. It was amazing to see the contrast in approach and response to this challenging situation.

As you might imagine, this was a very stressful time for all leaders. Knightsbridge fared well because our business model was tested and it was strong. Having a holistic business model with a collection of practice areas that can survive changes in economic cycles was a significant benefit for us. It was part of David's vision for the company and it worked. It was also a big personal test for me. I learned that as a leader, you personally need resilience and resolve in difficult times. Not only do you need to manage your own reactions in those situations, but you also need to manage those of your team. And in our case, we also needed to be there for our clients in their time of need. It was our collective obligation at Knightsbridge. We stood by those who were struggling to deal with the fallout of the financial crisis. Many of our clients lost their jobs. We needed to be there for them, and our career transition and outplacement services helped these clients in their time of need. Others who managed to keep their jobs were working hard to make sure their companies remained intact during the crisis.

What we also learned was that many of our clients, particularly those who were new executives, had led only in good economic times. For them, this was their first experience leading through what would be one of the toughest economic periods in history. Our services became invaluable as we supported our clients through the crisis. I was proud of my colleagues and the impact they had on our clients during this difficult period.

My team and I took to heart the now famous words of Rahm Emanuel, who in the middle of the financial crisis said, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.”

We didn’t waste this crisis.

Instead, we introduced a completely new go-to-market strategy called the Leadership Pathway. It provided our clients with a more integrated and strategic approach to leadership effectiveness and leadership continuity. Although the recession was hard on many companies, we came out stronger and better positioned to meet the obligations we had to our clients. What was also important to us was an idea I always believed in strongly: *We couldn’t just preach this leadership stuff; we needed to live it ourselves.* We needed to work both to become great leaders and to model great leadership when working with our clients. If we did, they would notice and feel the difference, and in turn we would have greater impact through our work with them. I can say that we have accomplished this aspiration because we were able to build a strong leadership culture within my team. The other lesson is that building a strong leadership culture isn’t just a destination you arrive at. You must remain committed in your efforts to sustain it.

In some ways, I feel that I have been fortunate to have carried out Zinta’s vision from all those years ago. Unfortunately, she was trying to change an organization that didn’t want to change. She worked in a toxic leadership culture. I know I’m lucky to be at a company like Knightsbridge where growth and change is the expectation and where we share a collective aspiration to build a

truly great organization. I never take that fact for granted, because I have learned over the years how rare this achievement can be.

And that's the final lesson of my leadership story: Don't waste your time in an organization that doesn't deserve your investment. Remember Zinta. You aren't just investing your time or your career—you're investing your life.

So as a leader, you need to determine whether your organization is worthy of that investment. If it is, then roll up your sleeves and get busy making it the best organization it can be. Your organization desperately needs you and your personal leadership. It needs you to make the leadership decision to become a great leader. It needs you to step up to your obligations as a leader. It needs you to tackle the hard work that you must do as a leader. It needs you to build a strong community of leaders in your organization. Are you ready?

## **Reflect—Your Personal Leadership Story**

As you reflect on the ideas in this chapter, think about your answers to the following questions:

1. What is your personal leadership story?
2. What critical leadership experiences have shaped you as a leader?
3. What were the positive experiences that had an impact on you?
4. What were the negative experiences that had an impact on you?
5. Who can you share your personal leadership story with?
6. How might you help a fellow leader better understand his or her own personal leadership story?

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