

Chapter 1

Choosing to Lead

Ground Rule #1

All leaders are born, but none are born leaders;
Leadership is a choice, reinforced by individual effort.

Born Leaders—The Myth

Okay, I've got to admit it: I'm encouraged. I'm encouraged because it appears that you are genuinely interested in leadership, either for yourself or for others. By now, you've seen the cover of this book and have possibly scanned the table of contents—and you're still here. That's a good sign—because people without a genuine interest in leadership (and sadly there are many, though for the life of me, I cannot understand why) simply wouldn't have gotten to this paragraph. They likely would have bypassed this title completely, opting instead for some riveting work of fiction—dealing with vampires, illicit love affairs, or some complicated plot surrounding international espionage.

But, as we know, leadership isn't fiction. Leadership is real—real life, real time, and real important.

Oh, and thankfully—leadership can be *learned*.

I recently had a rather animated conversation with an individual who, for some misguided reason, didn't share my belief that leaders are not born but *made*. He tried repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) to convince me that a leader either has it or doesn't have it from birth—though I was never quite able to get this gentleman to specifically define what the *it* is.

I find his assertion to be very troubling—and here's why. If this man is right (and I don't for a moment believe he is), then there would be no reason to read this or any other book that deals with the topics of leadership, motivation, communication, problem solving, team building, or a litany of other subjects about people interacting with other people. Books—in addition to training sessions, coaching, mentoring, even personal life experiences—would be of no benefit and a total waste of time for those unfortunate souls born without the leadership *it*. Why? Because those who have *it* simply don't need this book, leadership instruction, or anything else; they've already got *it*. And those who don't will never be able to get *it*—try as they might—from this or any other book or educational effort. Now, to me, that's sad to even consider.

I'm more optimistic than that. I believe that every human birth brings with it the possibility of a new leader. A newborn child conceivably has the potential to learn and grow to become a famous leader in the mold of Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Mother Theresa. Or maybe the child will simply grow into a more common, albeit less publicly visible leadership role in his or her company,

community, or family. But every single one of them can learn to lead, as can the rest of us.

How can I be so sure? Well, for one thing, I've witnessed the birth and development of three leaders firsthand: my children, who are no longer children but contributing adults who serve admirably in various leadership roles at their jobs, in their communities, to their peer groups, and in their homes. They are leaders not because I say they are, but rather because individuals have chosen, voluntarily and repeatedly, to follow them.

But they haven't always been leaders. I was physically present, an excited eyewitness, when each of my children entered this world. I watched with anticipation and awe as each took his or her first breath. I remember them looking remarkably similar—little pink, naked bundles of leadership potential. But I can assure you that not one of them, during their moment of entry into this world, leapt to his or her feet in that delivery room shouting, "Follow me!"

They were bundles of joy and potential, with their own unique personalities embedded in their DNA. However, they still had to undergo the processes of learning, growing, trying, and failing—while hopefully developing valuable lessons along the way. They forged ahead, continuing to grow, trying and failing, and learning again and again. They've become the leaders they are today as a result of the information, encouragement, feedback, and correction they've received from countless people—all driven by the uniqueness of their personalities and their level of personal desire.

I also know for certain that individuals can learn to lead because I've watched countless numbers of them do so over the past quarter century, in and through leadership training and

coaching sessions I myself have been privileged to lead. Thousands of these dedicated professionals initially saw and defined themselves only in terms of their supervisory or managerial responsibilities. But over time, they were able to learn and adopt new principles and then specific techniques that enabled and even propelled them into effective leadership roles.

Finally, I know regular people like you and me can actually learn to lead because I did so myself. I've been on a personal journey of leadership discovery for more than 30 years, all the while attempting to learn, grow, and perform ever more effectively as a leader. I'm certainly not where I ultimately *want* to be; after all, leadership development, like most good things in life, is a journey, not a destination. However, I'm far beyond where I *used* to be. And the satisfaction that comes with that revelation is invaluable and energizing.

Yes, individuals can learn to lead, but whether they're my kids or your kids, my employees or your employees, me or you, the one thing we must do to grow and develop as leaders is to all first decide that we actually *want to lead*. And we must wholeheartedly believe that the effort required in learning to lead will ultimately be worth it.

Your Most Important Professional Decision

If I asked you to name the single most important professional decision you've ever made, how would you answer? Could you answer? Most people can't, which I know because I've asked this of thousands of managers and supervisors in countless training sessions over the past 25 years. This question often results in blank stares, diverted eyes, and more than

a little head scratching. If the silence becomes too uncomfortable, a few brave souls eventually speak up in an attempt to offer some sort of answer:

“Well, I guess it was a good thing that I got my engineering degree.”

“I can say for sure that going to work for a big company has provided me a broad, diverse professional perspective.”

“Personally, I’ve been fortunate in that my job has allowed me to make a lot of money.”

Though each is a legitimate response in its own right, do any of them really rise to the level of being rated the *single most important* professional decision? I don’t think so.

To be fair, this question is a difficult one. Think about it: Even if you’ve only been working for a few years, you’ve already made thousands of individual decisions—and this list continues to grow steadily with each additional year of professional service. In fact, you’ll probably make dozens, if not hundreds, of decisions this week alone. Admittedly, when considered individually and in isolation from the others, the majority of these decisions may seem rather insignificant. For instance:

Decision: Do I need to return this client’s call now, or can it wait until Monday?

Decision: Is this report complete enough, or should I support it with a chart listing appropriate data?

Decision: Should I continue reading this book, or do I already know enough about leadership to get by?

Alone and separated from the wide array of other decisions we may be making, these individual decisions often don't appear to be terribly earth-shattering. But their cumulative effect is quite different.

Those of us with children are quick to remind them that making good decisions leads to positive outcomes. Conversely, making bad decisions invariably leads to less than desirable outcomes. Our past experiences teach us that this is true—and we wouldn't intentionally mislead our children, would we? But do *we* ever take time to consider the long-term implications of our individual leadership decisions—the ones we make incidentally, one at a time, without much forethought or planning?

I like to think of it this way: Every choice we make represents a brick that we are placing in the structure that will eventually become known as our reputation. Making the occasional poor or uninformed decision probably won't have much of an effect on our reputation over the long haul. It's the equivalent of unwittingly laying a single cracked brick surrounded by hundreds of solid bricks in a building's foundation. The chances are good that the solid surrounding bricks will support and protect the building's integrity from the weakness of the one flawed brick.

But if one were to recklessly, irresponsibly, and knowingly lay one flawed brick after another into the foundation of a building, that building's integrity would eventually be jeopardized, especially when (not if) that building was inevitably exposed to some sort of stress.

Of course, not all decisions are minor ones. We all realize that some are far more significant than others, representing

professional game changers—cornerstones, if you will, in my building analogy. If one were to lay a cracked *cornerstone* in a building, one designed to bear the entire building's weight, nothing could be sure or guaranteed. Such critical decisions—to leave one company for another; to accept a promotion or transfer; to align oneself with a highly qualified mentor; to lie, cheat, or steal to get ahead; to ignore the importance of personal leadership development—can change the course of future events forever. But how can you readily distinguish between one seemingly innocuous run-of-the-mill decision and one of those monumental life changers? As many of us know, they can sometimes look eerily similar.

If Japan Can, Why Can't We?

The year was 1980. There I sat, a young human resources professional, fresh out of college, tending to the routine business of the day, when my boss called.

“Phil, come on over to my office. There's something I'd like to discuss with you.”

“Oh, great,” I instinctively thought, an immediate sense of dread creeping over me. “I'll bet he's got something else for me to do.”

Had someone asked me at that very moment, I'm sure I wouldn't have categorized these initial thoughts as being negative. After all, I liked my job. I was the personnel supervisor for a large American manufacturing company. And I liked my boss. Jerry had hired me for this, my first job out of college, and for that, I was truly grateful.

But I must admit, I wasn't thinking much about the future—mine or the company's. Rather, I was satisfied where I was and not terribly interested in considering where I might be able to go, what I might be able to do, and what it might take to get me there. Simply put, I was comfortable—in retrospect, too comfortable. And unfortunately, I've since discovered that personal comfort is a mind-set far too many of us embrace, far too often.

“What's up, Jerry?” I asked, as I took a seat across from my boss.

Jerry leaned back in his chair and looked at me. “Phil, I need for you to watch a television program tonight. It's a NBC documentary called *If Japan Can, Why Can't We?*”

I was quickly relieved to learn my homework assignment wouldn't require a lot of heavy lifting. Or so I thought at the time. There was no way I could've known then that the minor decision to simply watch a television program would ultimately compel me to make the single most important business decision of my life.

That night, I watched the documentary, which prominently featured the work of an American statistician named W. Edwards Deming. I learned that the Japanese revered Deming for introducing statistical methods and systems, including statistical process controls (SPC), as critical steps in allowing that country's companies to regain their global stature as an innovative, quality-driven economic power following World War II. In the months and years after initially viewing the film, I continued learning more and became increasingly impressed with Deming's message. Beginning that night and

continuing for years afterward, I studied Deming and his systems—not just his quality systems, but his systematic approach to management and leadership as well.

In his 1986 book, *Out of the Crisis* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Engineering Studies), Deming wrote:

Long-term commitment to new learning and new philosophy is required of any management that seeks transformation. The timid and the fainthearted, and the people that expect quick results, are doomed to disappointment.

Deming's transformational message and the commonsense warning it contained resonated with me as a young supervisor, aspiring manager, and fledgling leader. I discovered rather quickly that I was unafraid of “new learning and new philosophy,” primarily because I was not yet entrenched in any particular *old* learning or *old* philosophy. My initial corporate experiences, such as working with supervisors and managers who were more than twice my age, prompted me to question the entrenched management philosophies of the day. Though I didn't recognize it at the time, I was in the midst of my own professional transformation. I was beginning to realize that a real need existed in most organizations for more informed, enlightened, impactful leaders, versus the traditional dictatorial, heavy-handed, top-down supervision or management style more prevalent at the time.

So way back then, a flickering image on a television screen led me to make a life-changing decision. I consciously and intentionally decided that I didn't want to just learn to be a *supervisor* or *manager*. Instead, I wanted to be transformed into a *leader* who had the professional responsibility to supervise and manage others. I also knew that I didn't want this transformation to be bound by the clock or the calendar. Since my entire career was ahead of me, I decided to do whatever it took, for as long as it took, to make this transformation a reality. Deming warned that expecting quick results would yield disappointment. Therefore, I settled in for the long haul, determined to learn and to practice what I was learning, every day going forward. And so I have.

That singular decision—to learn to be a *leader*, not a *manager*—has proven to be my most important professional decision—certainly more important than deciding which companies to work for or even to start and more important than money I've earned or invested. It was more important than books I've read or written—including this one. It has been said, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." Apparently, I was ready when Deming appeared in my life. Though I never met him personally, Deming was my leadership system evangelist and I was one of his many converts.

The results of my decision to actively and doggedly pursue personal leadership development have proven to be nothing short of amazing. I could literally talk for hours about the transformation that has occurred in my life due to my ability to practice the leadership techniques I was learning. The results I've experienced personally are nicely summarized in

Deming's *The New Economics: For Industry, Government, Education* (1993), in which he observed:

The individual, transformed, will perceive new meaning to his life, to events, to numbers, to interactions between people.

How true! Deciding to take and set out on this journey has impacted virtually every decision, large and small, while transforming my entire life for the better. I make decisions with purpose and intent. I'm fully aware and accepting of the responsibilities I'm to bear in professional and personal relationships I develop. My deliberate pursuit of leadership and what *Leaders Ought to Know* has expanded, elevated, and enriched the opportunities, experiences, and relationships in my life.

And the same can be true for you. Leadership is not reserved for a few. It's available to many, though it's unfortunately true that far too few ultimately choose to pursue it. But for special individuals like you who wish to be more effective leaders in their industry, business, community, club, religious institution, school, or even family, I'm absolutely certain this book can help lead them—and you—there.

Congratulations, You've Been Promoted! Now What?

Let's face the facts. Though we've already established that leaders can learn to lead, most of us were never formally trained to be a leader. The majority of the managers and

supervisors I know initially earned their opportunity to be in a position of leadership because they were smart, hardworking, and really good at what they did technically *before* being promoted there.

The engineer had a proven ability to analyze blueprints and schematics in the search for inaccuracies. The accountant was adept at interpreting the nuances of a balance sheet. The salesperson was masterful at prospecting, developing, and closing new business. The production worker was exceptional at overcoming unplanned, unanticipated obstacles to meet and exceed established production goals and standards. They were all good at what they did because that's what they had studied and been trained to do. After years of hands-on experience, their proven aptitude and performance capabilities had elevated them to an acknowledged level of competence and visibility within the organization, thus earning them a positive reputation for the good they had done.

Then one day, the boss called this peak performer into her office and announced she had good news. After much careful deliberation, this person was being promoted to supervision or management. They were being elevated overnight into what most would regard as a leadership position.

But did that automatically make her a leader in the eyes of those around her, especially those she had been tapped to supervise, manage, and lead? Of course not. And for far too many of us, that's where the trouble begins.

This individual had proven herself confident and capable in her ability to read blueprints, create an amazing spreadsheet, exceed sales quotas, or build the product safely and

efficiently. However, she was far less confident in her ability to communicate group objectives effectively, lead her newly acquired team through a process of consensual decision making, confront problems and individuals head-on, or successfully accomplish the dozens of other daily critical responsibilities that leaders are expected to complete.

This was all completely new territory to her. She hadn't been trained for this. Add to the equation that the employees and individuals this newly minted leader had been tapped to lead were watching, evaluating, thinking, and often saying from Day One: "Someone in an important leadership position like hers just ought to know better."

That's why this book is in your hands now—because there are a number of really important things that *Leaders Ought to Know* that most of us have never had the opportunity to learn.

The Doctor Is in, and the Patient Is Waiting

Let's summarize to this point. Some people—okay, most people—are pitched into the leadership fray without really knowing what to expect or do. They were born with the potential to lead but have not yet learned the critical leadership principles needed to be successful. They've worked hard in their previous positions and are now flattered to be recognized for their efforts with a promotion—a promotion that undoubtedly includes additional leadership expectations. Of course, there are also individuals who actively search out leadership positions and responsibilities but do so before being adequately prepared to accept them. We've all seen

such individuals. Some of these people are able to rise to these occasions over time, while others flounder.

During my live leadership training sessions over the years, I have occasionally used a fanciful, somewhat ridiculous scenario for illustrative purposes. Regardless of the industry I'm working in—be it financial services, mining, manufacturing, or some other—I single out two of the training participants at random, calling them by name for the benefit of other audience members. (Here I'll use the names Jack and Janet.) The exercise unfolds as follows.

Me speaking to the entire group:

“Folks, you're probably not aware of it, but we have an individual with us today who has a hidden dream. Jack, here, has always wanted to be a surgeon. Ever since he was a little boy, he has fantasized about being able to save lives and help people with desperate physical needs. You may not have known this about Jack because he's a relatively private person. But this has been Jack's dream nevertheless. Isn't that right, Jack?”

Though slightly suspicious, Jack good-naturedly plays along. Others in the room are usually snickering by now, possibly considering the far-fetched nature of such a possibility. I continue:

“Earlier today, Jack decided to finally act on his dream of becoming a surgeon. He drove down to the local medical center and proceeded to the surgical unit. Once there, Jack walked purposefully past the ‘No Admittance: Authorized Medical Personnel Only’ signs and made his way directly into the surgical prep room, where he came face-to-face with that famous surgeon, Dr. Van Hooser—me—who had just finished scrubbing up for a waiting surgical patient.”

I identify myself as the famous surgeon to the laughter of the group, including Jack. Janet is enjoying the activity, along with the others, oblivious to the fact that she will soon be drawn into this unfolding scenario as an unwitting participant.

“Who are you?” I ask, as Jack enters my operating room.

“Jack,” he answers simply.

“No, young man, you don’t understand. I don’t really care who you are. I want to know—who do you think you are barging into my operating room uninvited?”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Van Hooser, sir,” Jack explains. “I’m here because I’ve always wanted to be a surgeon. I know I can do it. I know I can be successful. All I need is a chance. I need someone—you—to give me a chance to prove myself.”

“Have you ever been to med school?” I ask pointedly.

“No, sir, but I want to be a surgeon.”

“Have you ever taken any anatomy or physiology classes?”

“No, sir, but I really want to be a surgeon.”

“Have you ever been in a real surgical situation, even observing an actual surgery in progress?”

“No, sir, but I really want to be a surgeon and I’m willing to try.”

I, assuming the role as Dr. Van Hooser, pause for the sake of effect before continuing.

“Young man, don’t ask me to explain why I’m about to do what I’m about to do. But for some reason, my gut is telling me that you might just make it as an acceptable surgeon one day. Therefore, this is what I want you to do right now. Here’s my scalpel. Take it. Now, there’s a patient prepped and waiting on the other side of this door. Her name is Janet.”

Janet's attention is immediately arrested. Laughter ensues as the audience begins to anticipate what happens next. Everyone is laughing now, except Janet.

“I want you to go through that door and attempt to remove Janet's appendix. If she makes it through the surgery, we can discuss the possibility of sending you off to med school sometime in the future so you can actually learn what you should know to be a surgeon.”

Laughter intensifies. Finally, turning my full attention now to Janet, I ask:

“So, Janet, how are you feeling right about now?”

“Not too good! I think I want another opinion,” says Janet (or something to that effect).”

The room is fully engulfed in laughter now, including Jack and Janet. Once the laughter dies down, I make the following learning points.

“Folks, I think we all agree that the scenario I've just created is ridiculous, regardless of the angle from which you might evaluate it. It's absurd to imagine, whether you are in Jack's shoes, Dr. Van Hooser's shoes, and especially if you're in Janet's shoes. Agreed?”

The audience agrees.

“However, I'm here to tell you that as ridiculous as it may seem, similar situations happen virtually every day in organizations across America and around the world. On a daily basis, organizations entrust their future to genuinely dedicated individuals who sincerely want to do well but who have received no specialized training or preparation and have not an inkling as to how to effectively lead, influence, and impact people to

accomplish organizational goals such as productivity, profitability, quality, and safety.

“We are giving untrained, unqualified individuals a scalpel, in the form of the power of the position, without training them how to use it, and then encouraging them to go do surgery on their departments and on their employees.

“At the very same time, the employees on the other side of the door are waiting—even longing—for qualified supervisors, managers, and leaders to emerge to help them with the challenges they’re facing, challenges they will never be able to overcome alone. They’re desperately searching for someone who knows how to lead and can do so effectively. They’re looking for someone to follow.”

Accepting the Challenge

I know the challenges of leadership transformation firsthand. I’ve lived them in the various stages of my own supervisory and managerial career. I’ve seen them up close and personal every day for the past 25 years, as I’ve worked with hundreds of organizations around the world to develop and strengthen their respective leadership bases. And while embracing this is not easy, it’s not impossible.

That’s why I wrote this book. My professional mission in life is to provide organizations with the appropriate concepts, tools, and inspiration needed to help transform great people into great leaders. At the same time, I value the opportunity to work with individual leaders—both aspiring and experienced—to offer practical techniques and tools for

being ever more effective in their current and future leadership roles.

As I prepare to share the critical principles that I believe will encourage and empower every person who honestly desires to be a better leader, I'll share two additional thoughts that reemphasize my own—and this book's—underlying assertion: that the essence of leadership development begins with a choice that both organizations and individuals need to consciously make.

A *Fortune* magazine article a few years back entitled “Leader Machines” by Jeff Colvin (October 1, 2007), reminded organizations that heightened levels of internal leadership, preparedness, and performance can provide a true competitive advantage. Specifically, the author wrote

Your competition can copy every advantage you've got—except one. That's why the best companies are realizing that no matter what business you're in, the real business is building leaders. (Page 98)

Second, in Jim Collins's book *Great by Choice* (2011, HarperBusiness), Collins introduces a concept he refers to as “10X.” To Collins, a “10Xer” represents a company that has become successful over time, performing at a level that far exceeds others that might rightfully be considered contemporaries. I think Collins's 10X description describes aptly what I believe about peak leadership performers as well, especially when he writes:

*They're not more creative. They're not more visionary.
They're not more charismatic. They're not more*

ambitious. They're not more blessed by luck. They're not more risk seeking. They're not more heroic. They're not more prone to making big, bold moves. [10Xers] . . . reject the idea that forces outside their control or chance events will determine their results; they accept full responsibility for their own fate.

And that is what I challenge you do: decide right now to take full responsibility for your own leadership fate. Don't leave your personal leadership development to chance or to the discretion of others. Remember, everyone can learn to lead if they will just decide to do so—but first, you must decide.

I would like to offer one more admonition before moving forward. Before you turn the page and begin reading, studying, and applying the principles that follow, *decide* that you will learn to be a leader and that, as a leader, you will *make a difference*, beginning today. Do it! Decide right now, right here, by making a personal commitment. Walk to a mirror, look at your own image, and say it out loud, “Beginning right now, I will do everything in my power to learn to be a better, more effective leader.”

The decision you make today—right now—may very well prove to be the best professional decision you will ever make. It may be the key that unlocks the leadership transformation within you.

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