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# Your Leadership Story

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USE YOUR STORY  
TO **ENERGIZE,**  
**INSPIRE,**  
AND  
**MOTIVATE**



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**TIMOTHY J. TOBIN**

**FOREWORD BY**  
**PROFESSOR JAY A. CONGER**

Chairman, Kravis Leadership Institute,  
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“The counsel of ancient wisdom is to know thyself. To be effective as a leader, you not only have to know thyself, you have to share thyself. The ability to know and tell your leadership story is critical to engaging others to get bigger things done. Tim Tobin has written a handbook that will help you learn how to do that.”

—**Scott Eblin, author of *The Next Level* and *Overworked and Overwhelmed***

“Tim Tobin talks about the importance of self-awareness and its crucial place in our action-oriented world. The ability to be self-aware as one moves upward in the organizational hierarchy is critical and often lacking. Read this book and apply the exercises and questions to yourself. Guaranteed to raise your self-awareness quotient and provide you with a way of more effectively developing your team.”

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“Knowing my life’s story and constantly updating it gives me the information I need to know who I am and enables me to connect with those I lead. Tim Tobin’s book tells me how to do it.”

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“Much is being written on how to become a better, more authentic leader. There is literally an ocean of recommendations—many of which are difficult to understand and use. In *Your Leadership Story*, Tim Tobin cuts through the leadership noise and identifies an understandable and effective way to become a better leader—by truly understanding and effectively communicating your own leadership story.”

—**Walter McFarland, coauthor of *Choosing Change***

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—**Jim Loehr, bestselling author and cofounder, Human Performance Institute**

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—**Victoria J. Marsick, Professor, Department of Organization & Leadership, and Codirector, J. M. Huber Institute for Learning in Organizations, Teachers College, Columbia University**

## **Your Leadership Story**

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Timothy J. Tobin



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
*a BK Business book*

## Your Leadership Story

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*For Chase, Finley, and Sara—*

You are my greatest source of inspiration and you provide the greatest meaning to my story each day.

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## FOREWORD

**L**eadership starts with you. To be truly effective, you need to know who you are and who you wish to be as a leader. You have to have a clear sense of what moves you to lead. You need a strong inner compass to ensure that you are consistently making the right choices. Without this inner clarity, you'll be pulled in directions that are unlikely to harness your potential or the potential of those who follow you. Metaphorically, it's like navigating a new city without the map app on your phone. You'll experience one misstep after another. You will not arrive at the aspirational end point each of us wishes to achieve over our lifetime.

So the journey to leading begins with you—discovering and making the most of personal passions, preempting costly mistakes through core values and remembering lessons learned in your past. You have to know your own leadership story. This singular insight is why Tim Tobin's book must be at the top of your reading list. It is a paradox, but if you wish to lead, you have to take a step back. You need to reflect on what means the most to you and to those you lead.

In my own work with executives and managers, I am surprised at how many have given far too little thought to who they are or who they wish to be as leaders. It is shocking. I say this because I know the price they are paying for this lack of insight. Instead of leading, they end up spending their days managing at best. They are pulled by whatever demands their immediate attention. They will also make poor choices because they lack an inner sense of what's the right thing to do. They'll make compromises when they shouldn't. They'll repeat their mistakes. They will all too rarely articulate their aspirations since these are drowned out by a "ticking the boxes" mentality. As a result, these individuals lack vision and consequently lack the capacity to inspire. The ultimate price

they pay for this lack of insight into themselves? They never realize their personal potential. Quite a number plateau in their careers, or, worse yet, they derail.

What Tim Tobin has done so beautifully is to provide a structured means for you to explore the essential dimensions of your personal leadership story. I will say that his book is the most thorough guide to crafting such stories that I have read. He takes you step-by-step. By deploying wide-ranging and provocative questions, he will have you reflecting deeply on what has shaped you as a leader and where you wish to go as a leader. I like to think of his book as the equivalent of the Mayo Clinic's Executive Physical for leadership stories—every dimension of you as a leader will be explored!

But why are these personal stories so essential to leadership? There is a funny thing that happens when you have to create a story for yourself. It forces you to powerfully clarify what is most meaningful and inspirational to you. You'll also come to realize that you really do possess an inner set of values. These are touchstones for your mental well-being. If you stray from them for long, something deep inside will disturb you over and over again. With clarity, you will be less seduced by the immediate distractions that take you away from your gifts and the accomplishments you wish to achieve. You will be less seduced by choices that have a short-term payoff (in reality, a false sense of accomplishment) but have a longer-term and expensive cost. As you go public with your story and share it widely, you'll experience a greater sense of personal accountability to live up to it. In other words, you will find yourself not only telling your story but also living it far more consistently! You will discover how it gives you so much more clarity when you are confronted with daily crossroad choices.

There's another big advantage to having a rich leadership story. It will help your associates to remember the right choices they need to make every day. They will be reminded of what is most meaningful about the work you do as a team and the values and

parameters that should guide every important decision. Why is that? Pioneering work in neuroscience and memory is revealing that stories engage us far more profoundly than PowerPoint presentations or abstract discussions or value and mission statements. They are incredibly sticky. We easily retain in our memories the moving personal stories of others. Witness those told thousands of years ago by the world's great religious leaders. Their stories, rich in lessons and guidelines, remain vivid today. We can recall them with ease.

What also makes this book special is that you will be learning from one of the most passionate individuals in the field of leadership. Tim loves leadership. He has lived it, taught it, studied it, and coached it. He has spent years learning the methodology of constructing effective leadership stories. This passion comes through in the purpose of this book: to help individuals see and experience their potential to truly lead.

In sum, your investment in this book will expand your conception of who you are and can be as a leader. In the long run, it will transform your impact over your career. I wish you a wonderful journey of self-discovery.

Jay A. Conger  
Chairman  
Kravis Leadership Institute  
Claremont McKenna College

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## PREFACE

Most of my professional working life has been focused on leadership development. I studied it in school. I have helped a variety of large and small organizations build award-winning leadership programs. I have worked with leaders across industries. I have had the opportunity to work with top leaders and world-class leadership speakers. I have led small teams and big teams. And I have observed others doing the same. I have also been fortunate to have some great mentors. And I have been equally fortunate to coach other leaders. I am a student of leadership. I have dedicated my life to it, and I have learned a great deal along the way.

If you look closely, you might say I have leadership coming out of my ears. (It's really not as uncomfortable as it sounds.) So as you launch into this book, you might be thinking, this guy must be a leadership genius. He must be (sound of horns) *The Perfect Leader*.

And do you know what? You would be wrong. OK, perfect is probably not a fair or realistic goal for anyone to strive for when it comes to leadership. There are just too many moving parts to leadership for anyone to be able to nail it all the time.

So to be fair, let's say the target is to be a consistently great leader—the kind of leader who inspires and motivates others. Someone who leaves a positive, lasting impression. That seems more realistic and more attainable.

Whatever the end measure, truth be told, I still don't get leadership right all the time. Heck, I'd settle for pretty darn good on some days.

Let me pause right there for a second. Why would anyone want to strive for leadership greatness? If it is to feed the ego, reconsider: it rarely ends in greatness. If the motivation is more altruistic in nature—to help others, guide them, develop them—you will find consistently greater fruits of your leadership labor.

If I can spend all this time immersed in the topic of leadership and not always get it right, how are people who are focused on countless responsibilities other than leadership supposed to get it right? That is an awful lot to expect. I've encountered great leadership, and I've seen great leaders have off days as well. To me, though, it's all the possibilities that make leadership so fun. That's right—leadership should be fun. But let's not underestimate the level of effort, planning, and development that our leaders require if they are to be at their best for those they lead.

Success at one point in one's career does not guarantee success at another point. I have seen in far too many instances that highly capable technical experts are promoted to a leadership position—with little or no leadership training. And they are expected to continue on their path to excellence. Unfortunately, what I've also seen is that sometimes that works out and sometimes it doesn't. I'm not much of a betting man, but I don't like those odds.

We've all heard the "Leadership is a journey" metaphor, and it is fair to say that I am still on my journey and you are still on yours. In fact, this book was born out of the realization that I've still got a lot to learn. I'm also at a point where I have a lot to share.

I wrote this book primarily for emerging leaders. Look, I realize that not everyone has the opportunity to attend a multiday leadership program or to have a personal leadership coach. Both of those take time and can cost a lot of money. But it doesn't mean you should be left to your own devices to just figure leadership out. Unfortunately, for any number of reasons, that is far too often the case.

Emerging leaders likely have the most questions about leadership and the fewest resources to support their development. You should think of this book as being like a class in leadership—not the dry, theoretical stuff (don't tell any of my professors I said that) but the real, practical stuff. In fact, consider this your personal class in which to become more aware of your leadership capacity and to improve it.

And for you current leaders who think you have it all figured out, you might want to give this book a good read because you might be surprised by what you find. Of course, any leaders who are looking to better understand who they are as a leader, as well as leaders going through a career transition, will benefit as well.

I wanted to do something to help enable more people to have greater success as leaders—not simply for them but also for those they lead. To create all-around better experiences. To develop more people. To—as the book’s subtitle suggests—energize, inspire, and motivate others to be their best. And leadership is about people, to be sure, but it is also about delivering better results for the business in the process.

If you’ve read this far, I hope you have an interest in becoming a better leader. I would love to contribute to your journey in some way. So we’re in this together now. You’ll see that I ask a lot of questions throughout the book. I would encourage you to avoid a superficial treatment of the questions and activities, and instead to reflect upon them deeply. Forget about the rule against writing in a book—if you’ve got an insight, don’t let it get away.

As with many things, you can expect to get only what you give. If you are willing to challenge yourself with some of the questions and look more deeply within yourself, you will gain far greater—possibly even transformational—benefits. I tend to lean toward optimism. With a greater understanding of your leadership story, you’ll find that the best is yet to come.

Timothy J. Tobin  
Washington, D.C.

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## INTRODUCTION

**W**hat is your leadership story? More important, who is the author of your leadership story, you . . . or someone else? This book examines why it is important for you to be the author of your own leadership story and how you can best communicate its value.

Let me tell you about one of my clients. I'll call him Bob. Bob was a self-confident, solid technical expert in his field—it doesn't matter which one. Although he had been a manager for a while, his successes, he felt, were catching up with him. He was being asked to take on more duties. He had never felt the need to hire a coach before, but when we talked, here are some of the revealing concerns he confided in me.

- Am I taking on too many responsibilities, too much? How do I know when to say when?
- Can I handle an increased leadership role beyond my technical role?
- I am not sure that I handle every managerial or project leadership role as best as I should.
- Right now, I seem to be trying to balance my technical expertise with the managerial role and project leadership I am being asked to handle.
- What does it mean to be a leader—I mean, a real leader who can maintain that balance?
- How do you lead people who have been peers and friends and lunch buddies?
- What do I do myself, and what do I delegate, and when do I know the difference?

- How do I balance the new work roles and my personal life?
- Others have done it. I'm confident that I can, but I just need some definition. No one wants to be an example of the Peter Principle.

I've known and worked with thousands of Bobs. And Jills. As you go through the steps of this book—yes, it's about a practical process—we will visit with Bob as he faces each step. As a reader, you can get inside Bob's head or imagine that you are he. His story is quite typical of successful people who are taking on more responsibility and seek out someone like me.

Your leadership story is the collection of events, perspectives, and behaviors that represent who you are as a leader. It evolves from your unique experiences. Your leadership story is not like that of the person in the next department. Hers is different; neither story is right or wrong. Your leadership story communicates the message of identity: who you are as a leader, what you believe in, what drives you and defines you as a leader, and how you act.

If I don't know about you as a person, then I don't know about you as a leader. And whether preparing to be a leader for the first time or an established leader with many years of experience, every leader has a story.

All leadership stories should be dynamic. They are colorful depictions of events that provide a snapshot in time, yet they are works in progress. They energize, inspire, and motivate. Stories illustrate and reinforce key points and provide meaning and relevance. They help us to learn, impart a lesson, and communicate a message. Stories help us to make an emotional connection; and, told well, stories are compelling and memorable.

This book is about making your leadership story compelling and memorable. This is not about how to spit out a 15-second elevator speech.

I have been directly responsible for the development of thousands of leaders across a variety of industries and levels, and each leader has his or her own leadership story. Unfortunately, too

often, leaders do not spend time thinking about or planning their story. It is given little thought or attention, and it is left to chance. Leaders who take a proactive role in understanding and communicating their story have increased capacity, stronger connections, greater self-awareness, greater authenticity, and better preparation to make routine and unanticipated decisions.

This book teaches you how to make your leadership story memorable by providing you with guidance for you to become the writer, director, and star of the story. Better yet, let's make it an epic.

## **Whom Is This Book For, and How Should It Be Used?**

This isn't a book where you will find validation of how excellent you think you are. Rather, it's about taking an honest look in the mirror and discovering how your story is perceived by others. After all, wouldn't you like to know how others see your leadership? Wouldn't that be helpful to your career development?

Most leaders are much more than what they appear to be. This book is meant to help you to be good, not to look good. You need to delve below the surface of your leadership and uncover the *why* that underlies it. If you go deeper within—to what you value as a leader, how you think and how you act—and move beyond what you think others want to hear to what you truly believe, this book and process has the potential to be transformational.

It is for all current or aspiring leaders who want to take control of their own leadership story. If, as a leader, you are interested simply in getting tasks done more efficiently, then this book may not be for you. It's not about project management.

Instead, it introduces a process to facilitate the self-reflection required for you to understand your leadership story. Included is a collection of activities and tips to help you build, shape, and communicate your story.

If you are interested in making a deeper, stronger emotional connection with those you lead, and you want to find greater energy and inspiration as a leader, then this book is for you. It is about developing a positive effect on the people you lead. Do you know whether your people resent or crave your leadership? Wouldn't you want people to crave it?

You cannot fake leadership. It must be sincere and real and reflect who you are. You must search your soul for what you truly believe and not just massage what you want others to see or hear. Chapter I will outline types of leadership and lack thereof.

You may choose to simply skim through the steps of this process with an eye toward identifying how you look or sound as a leader. If so, the result will likely be a superficial treatment of your leadership story. In life, in career, when does doing something halfway feel good, and when does it ever create added value? In *Creating Personal Presence*, Dianna Booher argues that personal presence is composed of four dimensions: Look, Talk, Think, and Act. She notes that most people emphasize the Look and Talk dimensions and assume that they are who you are. She points out that the Think and Act dimensions are the most important, and the most difficult, because they exist at a deeper level.<sup>1</sup> That is the level I'm talking about here.

For this to be transformational, you're going to need to do some soul-searching. And it might be uncomfortable at times. The real value: it's transformational not just for you but also for those you lead.

## **The Parts of This Book**

The book is made up of steps and chapters. When it comes to your leadership story, there are 10 steps—five to understand your story and five to communicate it. Each step guides you through questions, activities, and tips to give you a deeper understanding of your story and help you ultimately to become a better leader.



Although all of the steps are meant to fit together, you may find it necessary to spend more time on one step than another.

In chapter 1, we try to define just what leadership is. What enhances it and what compromises it? Why do others sometimes have a view of your leadership that is very different from what you see in the mirror? We also meet Bob. He will be with us throughout the book as he tackles each step, right along with you.

In chapter 2, we focus on defining and understanding what the current and ideal versions of your leadership story are. Each step in this chapter deals with a different story element; it includes an overview of the element and why it is important, five reflective questions, five activities designed to further create self-awareness and drive action, and three quick tips.

Stories take place over time, and they have a beginning, middle, and end. When it comes to your leadership story, the narrative arc is that point in your career when it all comes together. In chapter 3, you will have the opportunity to identify and reflect upon where you are on your narrative arc, as well as the people and events that have had the greatest influence on who you are as a leader.

In chapter 4, we focus on how you can best communicate your leadership story. The steps take you through knowing your message and audience, looking for and maximizing moments of truth, understanding the role of actions and other nonverbal communication, and enlisting others to help you tell your leadership story. Each step provides an overview of the topic and why it is important. I also include reflective questions to help you think about how to communicate your leadership story, strategies to help you refine the message of your leadership story, and a short anecdote to illustrate that aspect of storytelling.

I end the book with a conclusion and resources. The conclusion ties all of the concepts together and provides final thoughts for you to consider. It provides an opportunity for you to look back at the whole process of understanding and communicating your

story. My hope is that at the conclusion of this book, you are better prepared for challenges and rewards of leadership. Further, I hope that you are more inspired and that you have a greater ability to inspire those you lead.

The resources section provides a quick guide to the activities you can do yourself and those to give to others. It also gathers in one central place the reflective questions designed to help you understand and communicate your story, and the tips from each step in the process.

The perspective and activities in this book are meant to establish a process for reflection, to put in place an understanding that will help you avoid blind spots and become the author of your leadership story. After reading this book and working through some of the reflective questions and activities, you will have a better understanding of the current and ideal versions of your leadership story. You will also have strategies to communicate your leadership story.

So, if you are ready, let's get started.

## Just What Is Leadership?

In this chapter, I want to help you understand what I call *the Ecology of leadership*. Obviously, someone cannot be much of a leader if no one is there to be led. So it's a delicate environment of projects, priorities, and plans as well as emotions, sensitivities, and ambitions.

President Eisenhower once commented, "Leadership is the art of getting someone to do something you want done because he wants to do it." Ike's approach to delegation could be called subtle. But to him, delegation was an important skill and a big deal. It surely served him well in Europe as he dealt with many big egos to lead the Allied effort in World War II.

### A Word about Perceptions

Speaking of Ike, we typically don't think of him as having had a big ego. Supreme Allied commander, president of Columbia University, general of the Army, president of the United States. That's a résumé that would enable anyone's ego to balloon. But not Eisenhower. He was awesome and not awesome at the same time.

Likewise, it is important for all of us to understand how we are perceived by others and where that is consistent with our self-perceptions. If there is misalignment between the two, it is important to understand why that is. As the introduction implies, this book's process and steps are not intended to reaffirm to you that you are just so awesome right now. In a few paragraphs, you will meet Bob and watch his lunch mates tell him how not awesome he really is. It is a shocker for him.

## What Is Your Leadership Story?

The truth is, you are only as good a leader as people think you are. That's hard to accept if you wear awesomeness on your sleeve. A self-review of your leadership would contain inherent flaws, and too often leaders attempt to rationalize their behavior. According to the book *Leadership and Self-Deception*, by the Arbing Institute, leaders can blind themselves to their true motivations and capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Without a review from others, it is unlikely that our self-perception is accurate—whether positive or critical. Rarely is our own perception exactly right. And that has implications for our ability to lead others effectively.

Our awareness and acceptance of our imperfections is the pathway to excellence. To that end, this book establishes a system of checks and balances to help you to truly understand who you are as a leader, based not only on your perceptions but also on the perceptions and interpretations of others. You may not like what you hear. It may not align with your self-image. But it is critical to fully understanding your story. Think of it this way: The value added is balance.

Your leadership story is the intersection between what you believe your story to be and others' interpretations. It is reflected in what you say and do as well as how others perceive and interpret what you say and do as a leader. And to add to the complexity, others' interpretations may not be accurate. Or worse, their motivations may not support your story.

This paradox of who owns your story is a constant struggle. Are you the primary author? Or does your story live in the interpretations of others? The answer is yes to both. If you do not take primary authorship of your story, it will be crafted exclusively through the perceptions of others. That will not be a very accurate autobiography. The following figure illustrates the importance of understanding and aligning your leadership story with the perceptions of others. It also shows the problems of being misunderstood.

**VARIATIONS (OR INTERPRETATIONS)  
OF YOUR LEADERSHIP STORY**

		<b>I</b>		<b>II</b>	
		Insecure, humble, arrogant, clueless		Authentic, genuine, aligned, reliable	
<b>Others' Perceptions</b>	Accurate				
	Inaccurate	<b>IV</b>		<b>III</b>	
		Inconsistent, unaware, unreliable, erratic		Disregarded, hidden, unknown, overlooked	
		Inaccurate		Accurate	
		<b>Self-Perceptions</b>			

Your leadership story currently exists somewhere within the quadrants above. Each is described in detail below. Your story can manifest itself positively or negatively in each of the quadrants. Your objective is to understand your leadership story, work to get it to where you want it to be, and make sure that others are aligned with it.

### **QUADRANT 1**

This is a difficult place for leaders to find themselves in. It suggests that others know you better than you know yourself. On a slightly positive note, leaders here do not believe in themselves, nor do they believe that they have great attributes as a leader, and this may show itself as being humble. But even humility has a dark side: over time, others will eventually not believe in you, either.

Jeff lived in Q1. Everyone thought he was great, but he was quick to deflect praise. He would always say, “No, no. I didn’t do

that. My team did.” Noble indeed. People appreciated his humility, but eventually he convinced others that he really couldn’t do it, and that fate became part of his story. In a sense, he wrote it himself.

Ben was a leader who ran into this challenge. He was viewed by many as humble. He did not take credit for his expertise and leadership capabilities. When others gave him credit, he was quick to deflect it and say, “Oh, I’m not sure I did that.” He was admired by many, and then, over time, others began to question his abilities. It began simply enough, with a few peers and leaders saying, “I’m not sure,” about his abilities. Although his story never left Quadrant I, it quickly transitioned from humility to a question of capability. He had effectively talked others into not believing in him. An adage comes to mind: If you believe you can’t do something, you are probably right.

Another type exists in this quadrant. They are the leaders who are narcissistic, self-important, or overconfident. Leaders here think they are awesome—and they aren’t afraid to let others know it through their words or actions. However, awesome is not how they are perceived by others. In either case, these leaders either are clueless or simply don’t care how they are showing up as a leader. Your solution, if you find yourself to be in this quadrant, is to seek feedback and listen to others. You may find it beneficial to do a skills audit and to work on your executive presence.

## **QUADRANT 2**

Using the story as a metaphor, this quadrant is known as a leader’s true story. Leaders in this quadrant have a good understanding of their leadership story, and others do as well. Leaders here are viewed as authentic—what you see is what you get. They are genuine. They know their strengths and areas for development, and they tend to be willing to enlist the support of others.

Even if these leaders’ stories have negative attributes, they are aware of this and either take corrective action individually or are conscious of when and how to supplement their skills. But leaders

here should not get too comfortable. If you find yourself in this space, you should continue to reflect, be self-aware, and enlist others to tell their story.

Randy may not have had all the answers, but he was willing to bring in others to help. He had great ideas, but he knew he wasn't an expert in everything. His go-to phrase was "What do you think?" You felt like you knew him on a personal level and that he cared about you. And he was passionate about the work he was doing.

### **QUADRANT 3**

Leaders here are, well, hidden. They have a good understanding of their story, but no one else does. Because others don't know who these leaders are, they tend to be overlooked.

If you know your story and it is negative, you may lack credibility and will have some work to do to become a better leader. If you know who you are as a leader and it is positive, you need to become better known as a leader. If you are in this quadrant, focus on building your network, get involved throughout the organization in projects and initiatives, and enlist others to tell your leadership story.

Jeremy was a leader who fit this description. He was new to the organization, fresh out of graduate school. He had a lot of bright ideas but no way of sharing them. It wasn't his style to aggressively assert himself, and he didn't want to come across as bragging or trying to take charge. But eventually he became frustrated. He and I worked on ways to build his internal network and get involved in projects to showcase what he was capable of.

### **QUADRANT 4**

These leaders are inconsistent and unclear at best; they are erratic and unreliable at worst. Just as in Quadrant I, such leaders lack self-awareness. They lack thought and reflection about who they are as leaders, what they value, and what they stand for.

Many leaders here have not taken the time to understand who they are or what they believe in as a leader. To make this quadrant more directly personal to you, no one else knows you or what you believe in, either. People may follow you because you are the boss, but they are skeptical and reluctant to do so.

If you find yourself in this quadrant, you should begin by understanding your leadership story. As a starting point, focus on what you believe in and value as a leader. The good news is that almost any action you take toward understanding, aligning, or communicating your leadership story is a step in the right direction.

Sam was an established leader within the organization, due in large part to his technical knowledge. Sometimes he wanted to get into the details and sometimes he didn't. He would assign tasks and follow up on some but not others. None of Sam's direct reports knew what to expect from him, nor did some of his peers. How do you think his team felt? He never thought about how this was affecting his team—creating low morale, poor performance, and a sense of uncertainty. Others viewed him as volatile and inconsistent.

## Types of Leadership

What type of leadership do you want to master? What leadership style do you aspire to? You need to think about what type of leader you want to be. And here is the fun part about leadership: there is not one single best way to lead.

The choice is yours. Choose the kind of leadership, or combination thereof, that best suits you and that you aspire to. The purpose of this activity is not merely to increase self-awareness. It will help you to consider the ultimate goals of leadership so that you keep in mind the importance of your leadership for the greater good. The result will be a more meaningful goal—or set of goals—that brings fulfillment to you and those you lead.



There are many types of leadership. What does leadership mean to you? What is the role and purpose of a leader? As you think about your own definition of leadership, some of the words you used may have given you a clue as to what style of leadership you gravitate toward. Did you use words such as *help* or *serve others*? Did you talk about developing others? Do you look at leadership as a process? Is it interactive? With whom? As you think about the kind of leader you want to be, consider the various types of leadership described in the table below.

### TYPES OF LEADERSHIP

Type of Leadership	Illustrative Perspectives
Servant leadership	Robert Greenleaf, Ken Blanchard, Mark Miller
Purpose-driven leadership	Bill George, Clayton Christensen
Positive leadership	Robert Quinn, Ryan Quinn, Kim Cameron
Appreciative Inquiry leadership	David Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, Ed Schein
Stewardship leadership	Peter Block, Nelson Mandela
Conversations That Matter leadership	Meg Wheatley, Bev Kaye, Sharon Jordan-Evans, Juanita Brown
Peer-to-peer leadership	Mila Baker, Bill George
Benevolent dictatorship	So many examples
Command-and-control leadership	Some very famous examples

## Toward a Balanced Leadership Story for You

This book is about getting your leadership story straight. It is about facing the realities of your leadership story from multiple angles. It is about understanding who you are as a leader and who you want to be. It is also about understanding and aligning your beliefs as a leader with the perceptions of others—that critical balance. In short, *Your Leadership Story* is about understanding, aligning, and communicating who you are as a leader.

## Two Big Questions

Chapter 1 concerns two important questions, so let's try to answer them.

### WHAT MAKES GREAT LEADERSHIP?

Many definitions of leadership exist—too many to mention here. What does great leadership mean to you? And what does it mean in the context of your organization?

Look around you at the various leaders you deal with regularly. What do they do that is inspiring? Uninspiring? There are plenty of examples of great leaders and bad leaders. Wherever you stand on the spectrum of great-to-poor leaders and whatever your definition of leadership is, I would have one question for you: How is that working for you? If everything is going perfectly, keep up the good work. For most leaders, there are opportunities for improvement somewhere in their skill set.

Despite the complexity of leadership, there seem to be some common attributes, skills, and characteristics among great leaders. Leaders have to be technically competent. But technical competence can be both a hindrance and a requirement to be a great leader.

I refer to technical competence as a critical part of your leadership foundation because you have to have technical competence

and understand the business you are in before you can be a leader. At the same time, as you take on leadership responsibilities, you will have to let go of some of your technical responsibilities—that which got you here—in order to embrace leadership. You need to take time to understand the various aspects of the business you are in, the competitive landscape, and the operating environment in order to make good, fundamentally sound, and relevant business decisions.

Technical competence can be a barrier to great leadership for two reasons. First, being technically competent does not automatically ensure leadership competence. I have seen this firsthand on numerous occasions where a perfectly capable employee gets promoted into a leadership position and fails as a leader. Second, leaders with technical expertise may have a difficult time letting go of their technical responsibilities. I have seen leaders continue to spend time on aspects of their job that they should delegate. Great leaders need to focus on leadership.

Great leadership requires providing vision and direction. It requires motivating and inspiring people to work toward the vision. It requires developing other people. And it requires achieving results. In short, leadership is about people. Your ability to connect with people can make all the difference between great and poor leadership. Where this gets particularly complex is that different people have different needs, and those needs may shift over time, along with a host of other changing variables. Leadership is a dynamic, moving target that requires you to be thoughtful and prepared in your approach. Your leadership story serves as an anchor and foundation for your actions as a leader.

Great leaders have a plan, and also they are great improvisers. Just as a good actor has to improvise onstage if something unplanned happens, great business leaders, as improvisers, are the actor, writer, and director of their story. They must act in the moment. As writer, they must initiate ideas. And as director, they must provide a bigger view and facilitate room for ideas, creativity, and action.

## WHY FOCUS ON YOUR LEADERSHIP STORY?

You are the actor, writer, and director of your leadership story. You act in the moment, initiate ideas, provide a bigger view, and allow for ideas and creativity. Understanding and communicating your leadership story can be quite powerful. It provides clarity around what you stand for as a leader. It keeps alive the people, values, and life lessons that you hold dear. It gives you the power of influence and authenticity by allowing you to match your words and your actions. It allows you to build trust. Trust leads to credibility.

By helping you to understand what has shaped you as a leader, your leadership story can make the strong emotional connection that is necessary to inspire and motivate others. It can also be a useful tool with which to impart knowledge and lessons to others—to help them learn from the experiences that have shaped your leadership story. And it provides you and others with insights into what you hold important as a leader.

By understanding your leadership story, you will have greater self-awareness and fewer blind spots. It will also provide a starting point for you as you continue to develop as a leader. It will guide you in modifying your story so that you can be a better leader. When you effectively communicate your leadership story, you and others will have clarity about your expectations as a leader.

Leadership is a journey that involves the past, the present, and the future. Once upon a time, your leadership story was a blank page filled with hopes, dreams, opportunities, and inspiration. For many, those hopes and dreams included being a great leader. As you have realized some hopes and dreams, and have learned more through experience about what makes a great leader, perhaps new or revised ideas around being a great leader have sprung up.

What has contributed to the evolution of your notions about leadership? What has supported you in your personal quest to be a great leader? What has inhibited you from being your best? Looking ahead, what are you prepared to do to be the best leader you can be?

My six-year-old daughter recently told me something profound and relevant to understanding our leadership story. She said, “First you plant a seed. Then you nourish it. Then it sprouts. Then it grows. Finally, it turns into a flower.”

Our nourishment for growth and development consists of reflection, action, and insights. Let’s face it—we operate in a very action-oriented environment. We spend more time on action and results that reward us, and far less time on thinking and reflecting. Reflection is a process of understanding what happened and why. It creates self-awareness. A lack of self-awareness leads to blind spots, and at the least it puts you at a disadvantage as a leader.

Who’s got time for this reflection and self-awareness? I would restate that: Who has time to get leadership wrong? When you combine self-awareness with a willingness to stretch outside your comfort zone, you will see the greatest breakthroughs and maximize your leadership potential.

Learning plays a key role in developing your story. Reflection is about asking yourself questions. It may require thinking differently and taking action in order to build capability. Once you have mastered your leadership story, you will make stronger connections and inspire, energize, and motivate those you lead. You will be a better leader.

When I run workshops for leaders, at the end of the session, I ask the group a simple question: “So what?” So what did you learn from this? And so what are you going to do with it? I ask for only a few of the key concepts they learned, as I have found that to be more realistic in initiating change. If you gain insights without action, this book will be only partially useful. However, if you gain insights *and* take action, this book will be much more useful and potentially transformational. When you finish this book, ask yourself the same questions: What did I learn—about myself, about leadership, and about my leadership story? And what am I willing and prepared to do about it?

## The Driving Catalyst

What happens to people to make them want to lead—and lead successfully? My daughter would say it was a seed that got planted inside them. Said another way, what's the instigation, the driver, the prompt, or the script change that altered how they acted as a leader? What flipped the switch? Was it some dramatic turning point? Some change of heart or viewpoint, or did they receive some life-changing criticism? Somewhere in their career development something changed, and they found themselves with a new compass.

How often have you heard someone ask, “What drives that guy, anyhow?”

When Paul O’Neill took over as CEO of Alcoa in 1987, he faced a serious leadership wall. Trust at plants was lacking because of equipment safety failures. Unions wanted action, especially because plant managers did not enforce safety rules. What did O’Neill choose as the driver for his leadership of the sprawling Alcoa? Worker safety. He gave his home phone number to workers to call if something was broken or unsafe. Plant managers learned quickly that they could be fired for covering up a safety violation. By the time O’Neill left the company in 2000, trust and quality had improved, and so had revenue. The annual net income was five times higher than in 1987. And he started not with quarterly numbers and stock value but with worker safety.

Nelson Mandela turned his 27 years in prison into a drive for racial reconciliation in South Africa. He had the votes to become president and could have chosen revenge. He did not, and the country was better for it.

Howard Schultz, legendary Starbucks CEO, never forgot how his father had been fired after breaking his leg on a delivery route. The family lost its income and its health care. Schultz’s drive was to create a successful company that gave all employees health-care benefits.

I want to help you identify that driver, that seed as my daughter calls it, that dramatic change that can help you write your leadership story. On that basis, we can develop the story's plot in chapter 2, Step 1.

## Introducing Bob

But first, let's introduce the subject of our running case study, Bob. Bob works in a large service organization, and he's had several such jobs utilizing his expertise in other firms. Bob is an innovative thinker, a creative person, who, when left to his space, comes up with great ideas. But as I indicated in the introduction, he wants to determine whether he should continue as he is in his profession or take on more duties. Is he ready to be a leader? His anxiety stems from a true dilemma: this . . . or that, and is he taking on too much?

"Tim, I've had a great run in my profession. I've worked for many companies. Each gave me wide latitude to create new stuff, and I like that. But I am jumping around a lot. Five employers in the last 15 years. It's taking a toll on my family."

"Why did you leave each company, Bob?" I asked him.

"Well, others were being tapped for bigger projects, so I figured it was time to move on. What's more, each new company was in a different market space, and it seemed like a good way to learn."

"OK, but what I am hearing is this: you want to settle down a little, on the personal level, so what do you want to give up?"

"I guess I have to give up the thrill of my own pet projects and become a team leader. But recently a bunch of my peers and I took a leisurely Friday lunch after I announced that I was leaving the company. Conversation started with questions about the new job and then drifted to projects and promotions at my current firm. I started talking about my projects. "You guys are taking on bigger projects with more admin stuff, but I am off to learn a new business."

“Stop right there, Bob. How did your lunch mates react to that statement?” I asked.

“Well, I asked why they were doing that, giving up their own autonomy and all. But I guess the implication of my question just plopped down right on the table and kind of sat there: why not me? An uneasy silence came over the group. They started, you know, checking their iPhones and fidgeting.”

“After the dead air, did anyone say anything more?” I asked.

“One guy smiled kind of weakly and said something about the value of larger teams, something like running a big team develops more winners and innovators, and most companies want that. He added, ‘But it takes people who can lead. It’s one thing to be a technocrat or expert in your profession, but it’s a bigger thing to become a leader of other experts.’ Then he said something I have never heard of or thought of before. He said, ‘Bob, you have to develop a new profession—leadership. Not just project management. Not just managing a couple of people. Strategic leadership.’

“And then another guy at the table said it more emphatically. He told me that I needed to go after and begin leading big teams where I would set the vision, motivate and develop the team members—and *deliver big results*. He said that for big companies, it’s pure economics, like the multiplier effect.”

“How did that one hit you, Bob?” I asked.

“Well, the third guy piped up. I could tell he was real uncomfortable, you know, scrunching up his mouth. He said I had the reputation of being a lone ranger, a control freak. The others smiled uneasily at that one. Wow. I had no idea I was perceived that way. I was shocked. It was quite an awakening, like the mirror just got refocused right in front of me.”

“So did that casual lunch become a turning point for you?”

“It surely did. Tim, I am realizing something I hadn’t thought about before. Expertise is one profession, but eventually you have to apply your individual expertise to the leadership of others—teams, sometimes big teams—to become really, really valuable.



I have to stop being a lone ranger. I've got to learn how to lead strategic teams. By being a better leader myself, I will have the potential to get greater results and to have a greater impact on others. That can be a lot of pressure. But I am not sure I can rise to that level of responsibility. Can I become that big a leader? Do I have the right stuff—or should I stick with the path I am on? Can you walk me through your process?"

We will visit with Bob as we walk him, and you, the reader, through each step. It may not be a completely sunny walk, but you will be grateful for the exercise.

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