



Bootstrap Leadership

50 WAYS

to break out, take charge, and move up

STEVE ARNESON

Foreword by Dave Ulrich

An Excerpt From

***Bootstrap Leadership:
50 Ways to Break Out, Take Charge, and Move Up***

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Foreword

WE'LL KNOW IT when we see it. This line has been used by teachers on the lookout for a good paper, by friends trying to find the right gift, and by followers in search of good leaders. Most of us know intuitively what good leaders look, talk, and feel like. They inspire us with their vision. They motivate us with their call to action. They care for us by their words and deeds. They develop us by their confidence. They relate to us through their values.

Yet leaders don't just magically succeed. They need to combine certain foundational elements with the passion and discipline of continuous improvement. Yes, they need the building block skills, but they also need to keep learning, growing, and developing. That's the formula for success, and in this book, Steve Arneson provides a fascinating roadmap for leadership self-development, one that leaders at all levels can follow to improve their performance.

But what is it that leaders need to develop? In our work, we have synthesized and integrated the *content* of what effective leaders must know and do. We have identified five basic rules leaders must follow:

Rule 1: Shape the Future. Leaders who shape the future answer the question, "Where are we going?" And they make sure that those around them understand the direction as well. Strategists figure out where the organization needs to go to succeed, test their ideas pragmatically against current resources (money,

people, organizational capabilities), and work with others to figure out how to get to the desired future. The rules for Strategists are about creating, defining, and delivering principles of what is possible.

Rule 2: Make Things Happen. Leaders who make things happen focus on the question, “How will we make sure we get there?” Executors translate strategy into action and put the systems in place for others to do the same. They understand how to make change happen, assign accountability, make key decisions, and delegate responsibility to others, all while ensuring teams work well together and keeping promises to multiple stakeholders. The rules for Executors revolve around the discipline for getting things done and the technical expertise for getting them done right.

Rule 3: Engage Today’s Talent. Leaders who optimize talent answer the question, “Who goes with us on our business journey?” Talent Managers know how to identify, build, and engage talent to get results. They identify the skills required, recruit and engage talent, communicate extensively, and ensure that employees give their best effort. Talent Managers generate intense personal, professional, and organizational loyalty. The rules for Talent Managers center on resolutions to help people develop professionally for the good of the organization.

Rule 4: Build the Next Generation. Leaders who mold the future talent pool answer the question, “Who stays and sustains the organization for the next generation?” Talent Managers ensure short-term results through people, whereas Human Capital Developers ensure the organization has the long-term competencies required for future strategic success, thus ensuring the organization outlives any single individual. Just as good parents invest in helping their children succeed, Human Capital Developers help future leaders to be successful. Throughout the organization, they build a workforce plan focused on future

talent, understand how to develop that talent, and help employees envision their future careers within the company. Human Capital Developers install rules that demonstrate a pledge to building the next generation of talent.

Rule 5: Invest in Yourself. At the heart of the Leadership Code¹—literally and figuratively—is Personal Proficiency. Effective leaders cannot be reduced to what they know or what they do. Leaders are learners, drawing on lessons from successes, failures, assignments, books, classes, people, and life experiences. Passionate about their beliefs and interests, good leaders spend enormous personal energy and attention on what matters to them. Effective leaders inspire loyalty and goodwill in others because they act with integrity and trust. Decisive and impassioned, they are capable of bold and courageous moves. Confident in their ability to deal with situations, they can tolerate ambiguity. Through our work, we have determined that all leaders must excel in Personal Proficiency. Without the foundation of trust and credibility, leaders cannot ask others to follow them.

The Process of Becoming an Effective Leader

If these five rules are the content of what leaders must know and do, what Steve Arneson does in this outstanding book is to lay out the *process* of becoming an effective leader. There is a knowing-doing gap that sometimes keeps leaders from fulfilling their aspirations. Turning what we know about effective leadership into what leaders really *do* requires insight into how to make things happen and the discipline to actually do it. That's the wonderful thing about this book; it shows you how to make positive changes in your leadership style and behaviors.

This book offers fifty practical and realistic insights into the process of becoming a more effective leader. The insights are byte-size, digestible, and doable. They give any leader who aspires

to be better a concrete place to start in making personal improvements. Let me offer some tips for using the insights in this book to help you become a better leader.

1. Have a mindset and commitment to learning. Leaders at all levels need to improve. One of the key predictors of any leader is the ability to learn. Learning means that the past informs the present, that the present is not constrained by the past, and that the future may differ from the present. Leaders as learners reflect, ask questions, experiment, and improve. They constantly ask questions such as:

- a. What worked and what did not work in the recent leadership episode?
- b. What did I do and how was it received by those I was leading?
- c. How can I be better?

Read this book with a mindset and commitment to learn. Each chapter is an action item you might use to enhance your leadership capability.

2. Do an honest assessment of strengths and weaknesses. The assessment in the beginning of the book provides a lens to determine where you are strong and weak as a leader. We build on our strengths, but we have to neutralize our weaknesses. And, we have to build on our strengths that strengthen others. This book does not need to be read in a linear way. After taking the test, jump to a chapter that focuses on your strength. Ask yourself, “How can I use this strength to strengthen someone else?” Or, jump to a chapter that addresses a weakness and ask, “How can I improve on this weakness?”
3. Start with small successes. Someone made the statement, “By the inch it’s a cinch, by the yard it’s hard.” Trite, but true. Improving leadership does not come by leaps and bounds, grand epiphanies that transform the world, but by small and cumulative

actions that build leadership a brick at a time. This book is probably best used (not just read) by reading a chapter and implementing its techniques. See how the ideas work in your daily routine. See how others respond to you when you do the things Steve suggests. Then, repeat the procedure for the next chapter.

4. See yourself through the eyes of others. Leaders matter, but leadership matters more. Leaders are individuals who set visions, execute for results, and organize resources. Leadership exists when leaders develop the next generation. Like good parenting, leaders have to nurture and invest in others. As a leader, help those you are working with so that they can someday replace and surpass you. Use this book to identify some of the areas where they can improve so that they have opportunities and successes beyond even yours.

Steve is a leadership coach. By using this book, you can feel that he's beside you or inside your head offering you wise and timely counsel on how you can improve yourself. Being an effective leader sometimes requires third-party coaching where your coach observes and encourages you. But sometimes you are your own best coach. When you self-coach you become aware of what you can and should do to help your organization reach its goals through people and processes. This book offers a marvelous blueprint for self-coaching. The specific tools and tips can be quickly assimilated and eventually acted on so that you can become a better leader. These rules of leadership coupled with the process for learning and mastering the rules will help you move forward with more insight and confidence.

Dave Ulrich
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Introduction

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE DECISION to develop yourself into a more effective leader! You are about to embark on an exciting journey, one that will reward you with more knowledge, improved skills, and enhanced maturity as a leader. By picking up this book, you've decided to take charge of your own leadership development and, in the process, create your own personalized learning agenda. Given today's economic climate and pace of change, you can't wait for the organization to bring leadership training to you; you have to be willing to work on your own game. You can't rely solely on your boss for coaching and mentoring; you need to take charge of your own growth as a leader. And you certainly can't take just one class a year and consider that your development plan. No, you need a broader, deeper learning strategy and a customized plan of action. In short, you need to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. And you need to do it now.

If You're Not Moving Forward, You're Moving Backward

We are living in extraordinary times. The world is becoming more complicated every day, and we are becoming increasingly reliant on one key ingredient, at all levels of business and society, to help us make sense of the complexities. That critical factor is leadership. Whether it's the relentless march of technology, global

competitiveness, sustainability, or innovation, strong leadership has never been in greater demand. But you know this, because you're living it. You're on the front lines—connecting with customers, reducing costs, creating green strategies, and motivating and inspiring your employees. If you're a leader (at any level) in an organization today—whether a large or small company, a professional services firm, a school, or a nonprofit or government agency—you must continue to learn and grow or you won't keep up. No matter where you are, if you don't take charge of your development, who will?

Make no mistake: It's competitive out there, and one of the ways to stay ahead of the competition is to constantly develop your skills. Think of it this way: How would you like to come to work tomorrow with the same skills you had ten years ago? Most of us wouldn't last a day! As you're well aware, right behind you are plenty of bright, aggressive managers who would love to move up and take your place. If you're not willing to evolve as a leader, they certainly are. So what's it going to be?

The fact is, if you manage people or have a leadership role in your organization, you have to constantly add new capabilities to your toolkit. This isn't about maintaining the status quo anymore—things have changed. This is about you staying ahead of the curve and developing your leadership skills so you'll be ready for challenges that you haven't even dreamed of yet. This is about taking control of your own development and establishing your own leadership brand—one that says: "I care about becoming a better leader."

What's Your Legacy?

Why lead at all? What's so remarkable about being a leader? There are many ways to contribute in this world that have nothing to do with leading people. While that's true, there's something magical

about being the driving force that helps a group of people accomplish something extraordinary. My philosophy on leadership is that it's all about the people, not the task. Yes, you're trying to get stuff done; that's why the team or organization exists. But leaders don't lead buildings or computer systems or budgets; they lead people. For me, leadership is about helping others to be the best they can be.

In my coaching practice, I often pose this question to senior executives: "What do you want your legacy to be?" It's a popular question, yet many leaders struggle to answer it. Generally, if they have a response, it's something along the lines of, "Someone who got things done and took care of his people along the way." OK, that's a pretty good answer. But unless you've invented something pretty amazing or orchestrated a big merger, no one's going to remember your specific results; what they will remember is what it felt like to work with you. Don't believe me? What were you working on five years ago this month? How about two years ago? Does that brilliant spreadsheet or PowerPoint presentation jump right to mind? How about this one: Who was your boss two years ago? Who was on your team two years ago? Easier to remember, yes? The fact is, most people will remember your leadership in visceral terms (what it felt like to work for you) rather than a list of your specific accomplishments.

Here's an illustration of what I mean. When I facilitate leadership development programs, I ask the participants to go through a "best boss/worst boss" exercise. I put the participants in small groups and ask them to share stories about the best boss they have ever had and how these leaders made them feel. Their answers are almost all about personal connections; how the boss challenged, coached, empowered, and enabled them to succeed. You can feel the positive energy in the room as people share stories of bosses who helped them grow and develop. The mood shifts, though, when they share stories of the worst boss they ever had; metaphorically,

it's like a shadow has been cast over the room. I've heard some really depressing bad boss stories, and they mainly have to do with people being ignored, humiliated, or mistreated by their boss. The common denominator is clear: "They didn't care about me as a person."

How do you want to be remembered by your direct reports? As one of their best bosses ever, or as the bad punch line in a "worst boss I ever had" story? It's up to you. Are you establishing a compelling vision and creating a winning strategy? Are you setting a high bar for excellence? Are you challenging your people to grow and develop? Are you delegating effectively, so you can spend your time leading as opposed to doing? Are you stretching your leadership across the organization? If the answer is "not as well as I could be," then read this book. It will help point you in the right direction.

Improve Something Every Day

It is possible to get a little better each day as a leader. If you're willing to put in the time, you really can learn, practice, and apply new skills (or polish established ones) on a consistent basis. Your evolution as a leader never ends; you can always gain more wisdom, patience and maturity. You can always become a better listener or a more effective coach. And the more you grow, the more confidence you'll gain as a leader. As you gain confidence, you'll be willing to keep improving, and that will make you a more effective leader. Growth, confidence, effectiveness—now that's a winning formula that you can get excited about! You can do this; you can take your leadership to a higher level and, in the process, grow and develop your team, too. Start by taking the following self-assessment, and start putting together your own customized leadership development plan!

Bootstrap Leadership: Self-Assessment

Bootstrap Leadership includes fifty ideas, tools, and techniques for developing your leadership skills. Because every leader has different strengths and opportunities, this self-assessment is designed to help you identify which chapters of the book target your particular development needs.

Circle the rating that best describes your response to each item, and consult the scoring guide for recommended sections and chapters that can help you break out, take charge, and move up.

	Not At All	Somewhat	Definitely		
1. I remember where, when, and how I learned my leadership lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I have a clear sense of my professional network (work relationships).	1	2	3	4	5
3. I know how my peers and direct reports would rate me as a leader.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I have no trouble staying disciplined when it comes to personal development.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Mentors have played a big role in my development as a leader.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I regularly consult with a group of peers about my development.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I pay attention to and leverage my strengths.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My colleagues from past organizations keep me motivated to learn and grow.	1	2	3	4	5

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	Not At All	Somewhat	Definitely		
9. I'm open-minded and willing to see all sides of an issue.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My team has a clear sense of why we exist and what we're trying to do.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I believe it's important to have a personal definition of leadership.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I keep a detailed leadership development plan.	1	2	3	4	5
13. My approach to learning new skills involves deep immersion into the subject.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I do a good job of delegating tasks to my team.	1	2	3	4	5
15. My peers and direct reports would say I'm a good coach.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I find value in reading the latest business books.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I record my leadership reflections in a journal.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I do my homework to understand some of the underlying theories of leadership.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I tell a lot of stories when communicating with my team or others.	1	2	3	4	5
20. My personal values are clear to everyone who works with me.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I am familiar with my employees' cultural backgrounds.	1	2	3	4	5

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	Not At All	Somewhat	Definitely		
22. I have a good working knowledge of the different parts of my organization.	1	2	3	4	5
23. I keep close tabs on my professional network.	1	2	3	4	5
24. I do my own research to stay up to date on the latest leadership trends.	1	2	3	4	5
25. I take a keen interest in my people's personal lives.	1	2	3	4	5
26. I believe there is value in regularly meeting with vendors and consultants.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I know the impact our major competitors have on our company.	1	2	3	4	5
28. I stay up to date on other organizations' best practices.	1	2	3	4	5
29. One of my leadership passions is innovation.	1	2	3	4	5
30. I find ways to relate lessons outside of work to my leadership development.	1	2	3	4	5
31. I am willing to try new behaviors and other ways of doing things.	1	2	3	4	5
32. I regularly admit my shortcomings and limitations.	1	2	3	4	5
33. I'm open to attending local networking events.	1	2	3	4	5
34. I'm comfortable speaking to other groups in the organization about my team.	1	2	3	4	5
35. I'm comfortable asking my boss for new and different assignments.	1	2	3	4	5

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	Not At All	Somewhat	Definitely		
36. I am comfortable reading my organization's financial statements.	1	2	3	4	5
37. I'm confident in my ability to build a compelling business case.	1	2	3	4	5
38. I know how my health affects my performance and productivity.	1	2	3	4	5
39. I can imagine myself in a different leadership role.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I'm open to having my team critique our products and services.	1	2	3	4	5
41. I am satisfied with how I showcase my team to senior management.	1	2	3	4	5
42. I enjoy volunteering my time and expertise to groups outside of work.	1	2	3	4	5
43. I'm comfortable giving feedback to my boss and peers.	1	2	3	4	5
44. I spend quality time with my direct reports' teams.	1	2	3	4	5
45. I spend my leadership time efficiently, focused on the right big things.	1	2	3	4	5
46. I am open to teaching a formal training course inside the organization.	1	2	3	4	5
47. I spend time reflecting on my leadership impact.	1	2	3	4	5
48. I pitch in on leadership tasks outside of my regular duties.	1	2	3	4	5
49. I pay attention and listen carefully when having conversations with others.	1	2	3	4	5
50. I'm preparing for the day when I move on to a new leadership position.	1	2	3	4	5

Bootstrap Leadership: Self-Assessment Scoring Guide

Items in the self-assessment correspond directly to the fifty *Bootstrap Leadership* chapters. For example, item 35 represents the content found in Chapter 35, and so on. For items you rated a 1, 2, or 3, focus on the corresponding chapters to find tips, ideas, and recommendations for improving your leadership skills.

You can also target your development needs on a broader level by looking at how you rated yourself across the ten items that make up one of the following categories:

Items 1–10: *How Are You Showing Up as a Leader?*

- This section includes ideas for gathering input and feedback about your leadership style.

Items 11–20: *Add Something New to Your Game*

- This section includes recommendations for adding new skills to your leadership toolkit.

Items 21–30: *Get Curious about the World Around You*

- This section is about adding a new perspective and looking past the four walls of your office.

Items 31–40: *Step Out of Your Comfort Zone*

- This section challenges you to take a risk and break out of your normal routine.

Items 41–50: *It's Not about You*

- This section offers you ideas for making your leadership all about others.

Part One

How Are You Showing Up as a Leader?

SO YOU'VE DECIDED to get serious about working on your leadership game. That's great— given everything that's going on in the world today, you've made a wise choice to continue developing your skills. But how should you begin this journey? Here's a hint: How about finding out what others think of you as a leader? While you're excited about your own development, the fact is there are lots of other people who have something to gain if you improve your leadership skills—people such as your peers, your boss, and most important, your team members. How about checking in with them to see how you're showing up as a leader? Seems like a logical place to start, right? In fact, asking others for feedback is the “start” square on the game board of leadership development.

As you consider which areas to work on, ask the people around you for input. How are they experiencing your leadership? What's working for them? What's not working? How do they feel about your ability to guide the team in the right direction? What suggestions do they have for taking your skills to the next level? If you're sincere about soliciting and listening to their feedback, they'll tell you what you need to work on.

How Are You Showing Up as a Leader?

But it's not just others that you need to consult—you need to have a few honest conversations with yourself, too. Where has your career taken you? What have you learned along the way? What opinions have you formed that are helping you to succeed or, maybe, setting you up for a fall? What do you do really well, and what do you know you still need to develop? Can you trust yourself to diligently work on new behaviors, or are you going to need some assistance? What about the quality of your relationships? Where do you have opportunities to leverage the people around you for support on this journey?

This section of the book helps you find the answers to these questions. Start by inviting others to give you feedback and by reflecting on your own leadership brand (i.e., how others perceive you as a leader). If you want to break out and take charge of your own leadership development, this is the place to start. Take a deep breath, keep an open mind, and start pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps!

Where Have You Been?

Document Your Leadership Journey

“IF YOU DON’T KNOW where you’re going, any road will take you there.” I love this quote, not only because it’s supposed to get you moving if you’re stuck, but also because it screams, “Get organized, and have a plan!” This is great advice whether you’re planning a trip or your own leadership development. Any significant journey worth taking is worth planning. Let’s pretend you’re taking a six-month sabbatical to climb Mount Everest. You wouldn’t dream of tackling this adventure without a lot of planning, right? You also wouldn’t plan this trip without looking back at what you’ve learned from other high-peak ascents, both successful and unsuccessful. You’re going to need every bit of that experience to make this climb, so you better take stock of your lessons learned. The fact is that looking back can help you see the next adventure more clearly.

The same is true when it comes to planning the next step in your journey of leadership self-discovery. One of the first things you should do is reflect on where you’ve been as a leader. Are you doing this on a regular basis? Are you reflecting on your lessons learned? You should be; the leader who doesn’t learn from his or her mistakes is doomed to repeat them. What were the critical moments that shaped you as a manager? How did you react? What did you do well, and what could you have done better? How did

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others respond to you? When did you start to feel like a true leader? Most important, what did you learn from these moments?

Leadership is definitely a personal experience; the lessons you learn may be common ones, but the specifics of each situation make your leadership story unique. All of us can remember critical incidents that shaped us as leaders—times when we learned from a mistake or stepped up in a big way. Maybe it was standing up to a boss when you knew you were right. Maybe it was failing to pull the trigger on a bad hire or supporting an employee who turned out to be a star. Or maybe it was really listening to feedback and recognizing that you needed to change your leadership style.

Some lessons involve other people and can reveal patterns, such as failing to leverage peers or build relationships. Other lessons involve your own judgment—a fateful read of the strategy that leads to poor decisions or opportunities seized because you were willing to take a calculated risk. Your career is filled with times when you made the right call, did the right thing, or learned a difficult lesson. These are the touchstones of your life as a leader, the milestones along your leadership path. Your own leadership journey provides tremendous insight into how you should continue developing as a leader. In other words, where you've been can help clarify where you need to go. By reflecting on your lessons learned, you can build a development plan that optimizes your remaining growth areas.

Write Your Own Leadership Journey

There is an easy way to document your lessons and build your leadership story. Start with your first leadership role, when you first began to manage people. Write down the company, your job title, and the time frame you were in the role. Remember when you got your first direct report to manage? Were you excited about

Where Have You Been?

the opportunity? Maybe a little intimidated by the responsibility? You probably did several things right; but you might have made a few mistakes, too—first-time supervisors usually do. Think back to that job. What were the two or three most critical incidents that happened in that role, and what were the most profound learnings from those experiences? Write them down. Take the time to really think about the experience, but capture the essence of the lesson in a few simple words. Now, go on to your next role and repeat the process. At the end of this exercise, you should have traced your entire career as a leader and recorded your critical incidents and lessons learned along the way (see Figure 1).

Put your leadership story on a PowerPoint slide or practice telling it from memory. Share it with your boss, your peers, and your team. If you have a large organization, share it with your entire department in an all-hands meeting. Sharing your leadership journey allows you to model three powerful leadership tools at once: reflection, storytelling, and lifelong learning. Take your audience through your career, and tell the stories that have molded your leadership philosophy. Stories make your lessons come alive and cast you in a favorable light, as they generally involve you having learned from mistakes. Share your journey with pride—these are lessons that have had a profound impact on you, and sharing them candidly demonstrates that you're open to learning from the lessons that lie ahead.

In my career, I've helped dozens of leaders create and present their leadership journeys, and the process has been beneficial every time. People love the framework because it helps them establish authenticity, which is critical for leaders. The process is particularly effective with leaders who have a reputation for being "hard to read" because the personal journey tends to showcase them as regular people. Sometimes, the leaders I work with are reluctant to build a robust story; they think they're bragging about their background or, worse yet, aren't proud of some of their career

How Are You Showing Up as a Leader?

choices. The fact is, your journey is your journey—those are the stops you made along the way. Don't apologize for them. Every experience helped shape who you are today. Besides, the more important stories involve critical incidents and lessons learned—the very instances you should emphasize and use to grab the audience's attention.

By studying where you've been, and what you've learned, you can better chart the course of your future development. What leadership lessons do you still need to learn? What traps do you want to avoid? What experiences do you need to add to your story? Reflect on your own journey by writing and telling your leadership story, and you'll create a more vivid roadmap for self-development going forward.



Bootstrap Takeaways

Document Your Leadership Journey

1. Create your own leadership story by mapping your critical experiences and lessons learned. Pick out the memorable moments and be specific.
2. Share your leadership journey with others—practice telling your story.
3. Use the past to plan the future—what do you still need (and want) to learn?

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