LIVE AS A LEADER

Inspiration and Tools to Transform Yourself, Your Team, and Your Life

BY

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DEDICATION

To the thousands of leaders we have worked with
over the past three decades.

For your willingness, humility, challenges,
drive, and desire to improve.

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INTRODUCTION: THE LEADERSHIP GAP

Dave was an executive who, when he was bored, got up and walked out of meetings. No explanation. He just left, leaving behind those who prepped for these meetings bewildered and unsure of what they did wrong.

Marie was a plant manager in a small town who wanted to be a friend to all her employees. She planned happy hours and gave gifts to those who reported to her. She was beloved by her team—as a friend. At the same time, her team stagnated, struggled to deliver results, and failed to live up to their potential.

Mark was a CEO who never really knew what he was going to say to his team until the moment he opened his mouth. Then he let his instincts take over. Usually, his instincts told him to berate, belittle, and yell at those around him. He thought that was the way to motivate them.

Then there was James, who was usually good-natured and liked to joke with his employees. Smart and highly experienced, he had worked in his job for thirty years and had more knowledge about the facility where he worked than anyone else. And he knew it. He could be arrogant, refusing to listen to anyone else. And under pressure, he would commonly become quick-tempered, barking orders at those around him.

These are just a few of the corrosive behaviors from leaders we've encountered in our thirty years of work at Living As A Leader. None of these leaders are bad people, and in the moment, they all genuinely thought they were doing the right thing for themselves and their companies. We're pretty comfortable in saying they likely didn't know better.

They didn't realize that, in their own way, each of these people created toxic cultures. They held back their teams, and they failed to build strong foundations for high performance and personal and professional growth.

There are many ways for leaders to fail, from a lack of empathy to a failure to hold others accountable.

Too often, leaders fall into these negative behavioral patterns. It can continue this way for years, with people making excuses for the leaders, for the company accommodating and working around leadership weaknesses, and for employees feeling powerless to change the structure. On and on it goes until it finally reaches a breaking point for people or for the organization itself.

Does any of this sound like a situation you've found yourself in at work?

If you're like most employees, the above examples probably sound all too familiar. According to a Gallup survey, 60 percent of respondents had left jobs or considered leaving when they didn't like their direct supervisors.[1] Consider a few more of the statistics:

- Employees who feel their voice is heard at work are nearly five times (4.6X) more likely to feel empowered to perform their best work (Salesforce, 2017).

- Of America's full-time workers, only 35 percent are engaged (Gallup, 2019).

- 23 percent of workers said they would offer more ideas and solutions, and 21 percent reported they would be willing to work longer hours if they trusted their leaders (Trust Edge Leadership Institute, 2018).

These statistics support a startling fact: the majority of employees leave work every day feeling unsatisfied. Further, these statistics suggest that workers are more likely to be higher performers if they have better relationships with their leaders. The tragedy of poor leadership isn't just that it hurts the bottom line and holds down company profits. It's that it affects people and families.

Think about it. The impact of poor leadership goes beyond the time people leave work for the day. It extends to the dinner table, where families decompress and talk about their day.

> THE TRAGEDY OF POOR LEADERSHIP ISN'T JUST THAT IT HURTS THE BOTTOM LINE AND HOLDS DOWN COMPANY PROFITS. IT'S THAT IT AFFECTS PEOPLE AND FAMILIES.

Leaders have a choice. They can be the kind of leader that inspires and uplifts people to be their best selves—or they can be the kind of leader that makes people vent, get frustrated, and look for other opportunities.

The sad thing is, many ineffective leaders never see themselves as the negative kind of leader or witness the harm they cause. Usually, they were promoted into positions of leadership because they were talented, high-achieving individual contributors and knew what they were doing. They may have high technical skill, but they have no experience when it comes to guiding, inspiring, and directing people. They've always been accountable to themselves and their own output. Then when they encounter other people who aren't like them, they don't know how to react. They default to acting in what

they think is the right way in their mind—not in a way others need. Leaders make the mistake of treating employees as friends (instead of holding them accountable) or berating and belittling them (thinking that's the best way to motivate everyone).

No one taught them how to be a leader.

So far, we've focused on the consequences of poor leadership because it is unfortunately so prevalent. But the flip side is that leadership can also be transformational. Leaders can take low-performing employees and build them up. They can harness the energy of motivated employees and help them take the business to greater levels of success in terms of growth, revenue, profitability, and overall performance.

We've seen that it can be done with the right training, framework, and diligence. It takes time and commitment to develop as a leader, just as it takes time and commitment to learn and grow technical skills. Just as someone can become more proficient at tasks on the job, they can grow in leadership skills like empathy, accountability, and listening.

Sometimes we get asked whether good leaders are born or made. And the answer is yes, to both. We're all born with unique talents and personality traits. Personality is largely fixed by the age of three. But after the age of three, you likely learned to do a lot more to further your goals, from feeding yourself to driving a car. The same is true of leadership. Even if leaders don't change who they are as a person, they can choose to incorporate new skills and behaviors that make them the best versions of themselves—and help others around them reach their full potential too.

In this book, we will explore the most effective techniques for developing yourself into a confident and competent leader by sharing much of what we have seen throughout our thirty-year careers. Each chapter shares pragmatic principles that

organizations and leaders can put into practice in, let's say, the right way. You will learn from others' mistakes as well as from the successes that have happened when people learn to turn a weakness into a strength.

Before We Begin

We came across a statistic years ago that said more than 400 books are written on leadership every year. Leadership seems to be one of those mysterious facets of human existence that all of us keep trying to get our arms around. And likely, every book about leadership strives to define what leadership is. We're no different.

In our work with leaders across North America—who lead at every level within their organizations—we strive to remove some of the mystery of leadership by defining it simply as this:

Leadership is . . .
engaging other people
to deliver desired results.

This simple definition brings with it three important implications.

First, it states that there are essentially two key elements you need to be focused on and concerned with as a leader—people and results. Both are required for you to be an effective leader because they work in tandem.

The people side of leadership is a leadership responsibility we call Inspiration. How do you inspire, engage, and motivate people through your leadership in a way that they want to follow you? This is not about being charismatic or a social extrovert. This is about behavior. For example, how do you treat your people, communicate with them, coach, develop, and even discipline them? These behaviors and how you go

about them all impact your team's willingness to follow you, and so they impact your ability to lead. Think of the classic description of the leader as a bus driver—if you don't take your people where they want to go, they'll get off the bus.

But where *do* we need to go? The results side is also important. It's a leadership responsibility we call Accountability. You and your team do your work within an organization; that organization expects you and your team members to deliver certain results. As the leader, then, you need to create the conditions for accountability to those results. So, how do you provide direction, set goals and expectations, explain the rationale for a change in priorities, and measure performance—so that your people always have a clear vision of what success looks like and the results they are responsible for achieving?

The real challenge in effective leadership comes from balancing these two elements—people (Inspiration) and results (Accountability). Sometimes it can feel like these two don't fit well together. For example, Joe on your team wants to work on his special project, but the business needs him to complete and publish his weekly reports. How do you redirect him to prioritize the reports? Marsha always exceeds her sales numbers, but she's rude to the support staff. How do you coach Marsha to shift her interpersonal behavior? Cheryl has always done great work and is a passionate member of the team, but lately, she's been missing deadlines and seems cold and distant. How do you address those factors with Cheryl to get her back on track and re-engaged?

Effective leadership entails blending and balancing these two seemingly contradictory elements—Accountability and Inspiration—in a way that your team gets great results and is energized to keep doing the work. Accountability and Inspiration are like two oars of a leadership rowboat. We need them both, and we need to be good at them both. Overemphasize just one, and you end up rowing in circles. But

it can be done, this balance of Accountability and Inspiration, and we'll show you how.

The second implication in our definition of leadership is that leadership does not require you to have an anointed role or specific authority. Yes, we assume that, in reading this book, you lead of team of direct reports in an organization, whether yours is a team of front-line workers, volunteers, or VPs. So, you have the title (or aspire to have it), but a title isn't necessary for you to lead. Leadership extends well beyond your role or authority. There are plenty of people in your work world who you need to "engage to deliver desired results" even though they don't report to you. You lead and influence your peers, colleagues, vendors—even your own boss. You often need to get results *through* these other people, even though you have no formal authority over them.

In other words, you don't need to be a "manager" to be a leader. In fact, throughout this book, we use the term leader (over manager or supervisor) because we want to continually underscore that you can lead from any seat, wherever you are, at any time. Leadership encompasses certain skills and behaviors that can be applied and transferred between and among all the roles you play at work—and in life. The strategies, techniques, and behaviors we'll share with you for great leadership work well within all of your important relationships, even at home—with your spouse, significant other, children, friends, neighbors, on and on.

You can "live as a leader" wherever you are.

It's Not About You

The third and final implication in our definition of leadership is subtle—but it's the most important of the three.

When you're a leader, it's not about you.

Look again at our definition: "Leadership is engaging other people to deliver desired results." Nowhere in that definition is there a reference to you and your results. Yes, we get it: Every leader today is a "working leader." You have your own projects and deliverables you're responsible for, but those responsibilities are not your leadership. They are the ways you personally and directly contribute to outcomes. Your leadership is a separate and distinct way that you contribute to the success of the team and organization—components that are outside of and greater than you. Leadership is about enabling and enhancing the ability of others to be successful at delivering the results *they* are responsible for.

> When you're a leader, it's not about you.

Every failure of leadership we see comes, in some way, from the leader's overemphasis on *me*. For example, a leader who berates her team member for missing a deadline reacts out of her attachment to the result. She aligns herself to the result, taking it personally as if she and the result are one and the same. That attachment leads to her lashing out, which will probably disengage her team member further.

Or, take the leader who avoids coaching a team member who is underperforming because he, the leader, finds such conversations difficult and uncomfortable. He is failing to lead because of his own emotional discomfort, forgetting that his responsibility as a leader is to help the team member succeed. Without a conversation, failure will continue.

Successful leaders see their role as leader to be outward-facing, not inward-facing. When things go well, they give credit to the team. When things don't go well, they look for what they themselves did that prevented or impeded success, and they look for what they can do differently and productively to help the team get back on track.

Strong, successful leaders know that their own success comes only through fostering the success of others.

Are You Willing to Go on This Journey?

No change worth happening ever takes place overnight. If you want to finish a marathon, you won't transform into a distance runner after one run. And no leader became an inspirational force and accountability genius after one meeting with a direct report.

Developing good leadership takes time, dedication, and practice. First, we have to identify where we have opportunities to make a more positive impact as a leader; then, we need to be committed to developing new skills and behaving differently to improve our overall effectiveness.

So, on a scale from one to ten (ten being highest), answer for yourself these two questions:

How willing are you to be a more effective, competent, and confident leader? What's your number? Write it down here.

What's your current level of ability (skill level) as a competent and confident leader? Write down your number.

Like any other pursuit, your willingness to grow, develop, and change the way you lead will directly impact and propel your progress through this book. This journey will require effort and practice. Each chapter includes action steps and exercises to get you going. We encourage you to devote time and energy to these steps and actions and to practice them as many times as necessary until you feel comfortable and proficient. And even more important, continue these steps until you have helped your team transform.

If you're not willing to take this journey, or your willingness is very low, this book might be better for another time—or as a gift to someone else.

> YOUR WILLINGNESS TO GROW, DEVELOP, AND CHANGE THE WAY YOU LEAD WILL DIRECTLY IMPACT AND PROPEL YOUR PROGRESS THROUGH THIS BOOK.

As for your ability and skill level, that's a benchmark. It's an overall gut check to give you a gauge that you can measure again at the end. Undoubtedly, as you considered your ability number, you were aware of areas where your skill level is high and other areas where you struggle. That's ok. Use that knowledge and insight to pay attention to what resonates as you read on to identify what's most important for you. Effective leadership entails a common set of principles and practices, yet every leader is different and needs to develop and grow in different ways. Be aware of what you need most to become the best leader you can be.

The path to becoming an effective leader won't be easy. Nothing worthwhile ever is. But it can be done, and we know because we've seen it time and again.

Ready to begin?

Let's learn how to live as a leader.

1

SEEING PEOPLE AS PEOPLE

Tim had never seen such a disconnect between a leadership team and the rest of a company before. As a plant manager, Tim was brought in to turn around a culture of low morale and distrust at one of the world's largest fruit-processing facilities. The situation he found at this new plant created a divide between leaders and the rest of the plant—literally.

The corporate leadership team operated in a corporate office building a few blocks away from the rest of the plant. There was an informal rule—enforced through tradition if not on the books—that the leadership team parked in an unofficial executive lot. As a result, a wedge formed between these opposing camps as they grew apart.

"There was a lot of draconian behavior at that facility," Tim remembered.

Tim's first action at the new plant was to help bridge the physical and emotional gap. First, any employee who got to work first could park anywhere. Period. There was no such thing as an executive lot. Second, he moved corporate leaders over to the plant so they were visible and accessible to employees. He then regularly took the leadership team on

walks throughout the plant. He wanted workers and leaders to see each other on a regular basis.

As a symbol of goodwill, he then set up his own office in a communal conference room in the plant. He told his staff that if anyone had any issues they wanted to bring up, they could come in and talk to him anytime.

"If you happen to have a need," he told his team, "I will be sitting right here. I will make myself fully available to you."

Then he ran into another roadblock. The employee badges were restricted, and employees physically weren't allowed to access the office area that held Tim's conference room. So he called IT and told them to give employees access to offices during work hours.

"We are going to fix this, and we are going to fix it today," he announced. "All employees need to have access to the office areas. During normal business hours, they need to see me, and they need to see us."

Each rule, by itself, was not major. All workplaces need structure and regulations. But each small indignity or attempt to keep the workers in their place added up to a culture of opposing sides in the same company. This was not lost on the employees. In an online review, one employee wrote how corporate leaders seemed to work in their own bubble. Another employee noted the lack of teamwork between teams because of management practices pitting teams against each other. Somewhere along the way, this company stopped seeing people fully as people.

Over the years, we've talked with leaders about what it means to respect someone. It means to have regard for them: their preferences, concerns, ideas, opinions, dreams, hopes, and struggles. They have to matter. The word regard comes from the origin of the word guard: to watch over, defend, and take care. True leadership, at its core, has regard for others in all situations.

For Tim, this wasn't his first time being tapped to complete a turnaround, but this was his most challenging to date. We started partnering with Tim to equip him and his leaders with tools and techniques to help employees feel trusted, safe, and, above all, human. Put simply, their job was to treat people as people.

After physically opening up the workplace, Tim's next step was to get employees to open up and talk. He wanted to hear from as many people as possible. Instead of a traditional roundtable—which can be dominated by a couple of strong personalities—we recommended sessions with markers, flip charts, and sticky notes where everyone could write down their own thoughts and opinions and ask questions. The room full of thoughts, opinions, and questions made for great team discussion. Tim did this again and again, with around twenty small group sessions. Themes began to emerge. And more importantly, employees finally felt heard and respected.

"Everybody is now participating, and everyone has their voice heard," Tim remembered of these sessions. "Now we have a platform for conversation."

Tim is a tall and imposing man with a dark beard who looks like he could play linebacker. He's the kind of guy who looks like if he barked orders, others would jump and listen. But that belies a gentle demeanor—and one that's more effective. Tim's goal in this situation was not to come in telling people how things needed to be done—his way or the highway. Instead, it was to level the playing field, treat others with dignity, and open doors—sometimes literally open doors. Taken together, these simple but powerful steps helped create allies rather than competitors.

Creating allies, forging connections, and building relationships is the first step in leadership development. Before leaders can make change, increase profitability, and impact bottom-line results, they need to see and treat people as people.

> BEFORE LEADERS CAN MAKE CHANGE, INCREASE PROFITABILITY, AND IMPACT BOTTOM-LINE RESULTS, THEY NEED TO SEE AND TREAT PEOPLE AS PEOPLE.

That's how your team starts to share a common cause. That's how you create the conditions where your people want to follow you.

Becoming Other-Centered

When we begin working with a new group of leaders, one of the first things we tell them is what we told you in the introduction: When you become a leader, it's no longer about you. To lead effectively—to engage other people to deliver results—leaders need to transition from self-centeredness to other-centeredness. This is an essential shift. Sometimes with leaders, we're more direct, telling them: "Get over yourself!" Of course, we say it with a grain of salt, but for some people, it's the first time anyone has ever challenged them about the risk of being self-focused or self-centered as a leader.

Many new leaders, as well as those who are more seasoned, still think leadership is all about them: It's about their promotion, their raise, their title, their power, their corporate climb, their accomplishments, their awards, or their corner office. In fact, one leader said to his employees, "Listen, I want to get one thing perfectly clear; I don't work for you. You work for me." This person is missing the boat entirely.

When we work with leaders, we plant the seeds at the beginning. We tell them that as soon as they accepted the role as leader of other people, they willingly signed up and acknowledged that moving forward will not be about them; it will be about others. This means taking time to learn the role and responsibilities of a leader. It means having a plan for intentional, or designed, leadership. It is now about being able

to put your employees, or your team, first. It is about being able to put your own work aside when necessary to talk with an employee, solve a problem, or help an employee without saying, "I'm really busy right now. Can't it wait until later?"

Not everyone is ready or able to give up self-centeredness and switch to other-centeredness at the same time in their life. There may be a need to resolve other areas of life before they can make such a shift. The American Psychology Association states that the average age at which a person shifts from being primarily self-centered to other-centered is thirty-eight. Their rationale is that during early adulthood, there's a self-centered focus on acquisition, accomplishments, and survival when earnings are less. This is a time when people are looking for their life partners, settling into the right company, striving for promotions, earning additional degrees, trying to pay bills, buying their first house, starting a family, and so forth.

As you are personally able to make the shift from self-centeredness to other-centeredness, you will be that much closer to being an effective leader. How can you tell? You will honestly feel good inside when an individual, or team, succeeds under your leadership. It's even simpler to tell that you have arrived as a leader when you walk into a room and recognize that it's not about these people being lucky you've arrived, but about you being grateful they are all here.

To get to this place, it helps if you shift and change the way you think about other people in two fundamental ways.

Everyone Has a Box of Life

In our own lives, we recognize how a variety of complex factors shape our actions. We know if we showed up late for an appointment, it could be because the baby needed a diaper change right before we walked out the door, or we hit traffic when a car accident closed down the freeway. But as we ob-

serve others, we only know what we see on the surface, and we make assumptions. If you were late, I might assume that it's because you can't stick to a schedule, you're lazy, or you don't view timeliness as a priority.

In psychology, this is called the Fundamental Attribution Error. This means that, for ourselves, we ascribe all the situations and environmental conditions that we know went into shaping our actions. But in others, we only see the surface, so we don't stop to think about everything they may be struggling with, thinking about, or facing. No one holds a sign around their neck that says, *I'm worried about my mother's health while she gets medical tests today, and that's why I seem distant at today's meeting.* Or, *I have a special needs child, and that is what makes my schedule less predictable than others.* Seeing someone check out at a meeting, we may think they're disengaged or just don't care about this project. Or working with someone who requires more flexibility in their schedule may feel unfair unless you realize the unseen challenges.

It takes time and effort to get at the true motivations of others. But like peeling an onion, there are always more layers than what you see on the surface.

One way to begin softening our very-human tendency toward Fundamental Attribution Error is a practice called *sonder*. You can practice right now, especially if you are in public. The idea of sonder refers to the profound feeling of realizing that everyone, including strangers you pass on the street, has a life as rich and complex as your own. Practice sonder on the street, the train, a coffee shop, or anywhere people are around.

Right now, for instance, we're in a coffee shop on a Saturday morning. An older man, perhaps in his late seventies, is sitting side by side with a man in his twenties with similar features, probably his grandson. The older man has close-cropped white hair, and the younger man has dark hair,

tattoos, a trendy haircut, and new clothes. They come from different generations. They likely have a different vocabulary and value different things at distinct stages in their lives. But they are watching a soccer game together on a tablet in front of them. They both love soccer. Grandpa played professionally in Europe when he was younger, and some of his grandson's fondest memories from his own childhood were the times when Grandpa played soccer with him in the backyard, teaching him how to dribble and pass. And Grandpa attended every game his grandson played in middle school and high school. Today, they're coming together to watch Grandpa's old team in the championship. Soccer has been their common passion for bridging a divide of maybe forty or fifty years. They understand each other through it, and their bond runs deep.

Or at least that could be what we tell if we glimpse beneath the surface. Every person has a story.

Look at the people surrounding you right now or think about the people you saw on the street today or in the restaurant at lunch. Realize that they all have lived rich and full lives just like you, full of hardships and pain, hopes and dreams, love and heartbreak, with boring, mundane tasks and moments of pure joy. They all have perspectives on life and belief systems and goals for the future.

Now, you could pick any one of those people and, through sonder, imagine what their story is like, as we did with the two men in the coffee shop. Was the story we told ourselves about their lives and relationship correct? We'll never know! But that's not the point. The point is to open ourselves up to the realization that rich and complex possibilities exist in the lives of everyone we meet.

The same is true for the people you lead. Remember that we can see below the surface of our own actions, but we don't automatically think about the backstories that drive and shape the lives and actions of other people, including

our employees. It takes an extra effort to see what's driving their attitudes, beliefs, and actions. For leaders, it's necessary to take an additional step and learn about the deeper motivations of your team.

In our practice, we call this the Box of Life exercise. Think about your own Box of Life. You have it with you wherever you go. And no one—not one person—has a box exactly like yours. Your box contains your experiences, lessons learned, your hopes and dreams, education, your upbringing, your innate tendencies, your values, and so much more. Your Box of Life shapes who you are and how you operate in the world. More important, it shapes how you *see* the world. It shapes your judgments and assumptions about the events going on around you. It shapes how you think the world and other people should be. If the event reflects what's in your box, it's right. If it's not in your box, it's wrong.

> Your Box of Life shapes who you are and how you operate in the world.

Let's take an example. Suppose you have a new person on your team, Sandy. Over the course of the first few weeks with Sandy, you notice that he doesn't quite seem to finish things. He does everything to about 80 percent, then stops.

As Sandy's leader, how would you react and respond? If you're like most leaders we work with during this exercise, your reaction to this scenario might be that Sandy is lazy, he doesn't care, or he doesn't like the job. Like most leaders, you probably got to your leadership role in part because you pay attention to details, follow through to completion and have high standards for doing good work. Those ways of being are elements within your Box of Life. So what's up with Sandy?

The answer is: We don't know. The real question is, "What's in his Box of Life?" What is it that's going on for Sandy that you don't know or understand? Your assumptions that he is

lazy or doesn't care or doesn't like his new job don't help. Your "stories" about Sandy's performance will likely only lead you to feel frustrated, impatient, or intolerant.

Could it be that Sandy is more of a big-picture thinker who doesn't tend to focus as much on details? Did you know that about a quarter of our population is wired that way? Could it be that Sandy believes that he is, indeed, taking his projects to the expected level of completion, based on the training he received when he joined your team? Could it be that his mind is elsewhere because his fiancée just broke up with him? These are sonder-like questions, and they're good questions, yet they only take us so far.

If you really want to create allies among the people you lead, if you really want to forge connections and build relationships with them—so you can engage and inspire and lead them—you'll need to get to know them as people. They are not furniture, robots, or machines. They're complex people, just like you. Learn to see and understand who they are.

Lead with Curiosity

When someone on your team does something you don't understand, or that frustrates you, get curious. Ask questions to understand what's going on for them.

We talked earlier about peeling the onion. This skill of peeling away the outer shell to get underneath can be learned and practiced. We practice this skill regularly with our clients. We pair together two concepts we refer to as "let them hold the ball" and "peel the onion." Put the ball in their court and let them take control, let them explain, let them tell their story. Then peel back the layers, one by one, through effective questioning. Remember to let *them* continue to hold the ball, do most of the talking.

Your confusion about someone's actions or behaviors can be a great source for questions. With Sandy, for example, you're confused about the fact that he seems to stop short on projects. What's that about? What's behind it? What is his level of understanding about what "done" looks like in the context of your team's work? What is his understanding of the expectation? It's OK to be confused. Let that confusion spur your curiosity.

Leading with curiosity brings two advantages. First, it helps you focus on something other than your own assumptions or emotional reactions. You make it a point to find out the rest of the story rather than make up your own. Second, such an approach, especially with your team members, gives you a chance to understand them better. As a result, it builds trust. The goal isn't to pry into their personal lives or deepest, darkest secrets. The goal is to learn what makes your people tick. The goal is to learn how each person on your team needs to be led. Each of them is different as a person, a human being. Your job is to understand each of them so you can tailor your leadership to what they need most from you to be successful and deliver the results you seek.

In Stephen Covey's classic book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, habit number five is: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."[2] We believe this to be a fundamental practice of effective leadership. And so does Tim, whose story opened this chapter. His whole mission to reinvent the culture of his new company was based on understanding how people felt, what they had experienced, and what obstacles were in their way. He sought to understand them, involve them, and listen. You can too.

Reflection: The Box of Life

On the following page, think about your own experiences with others at work, whether they're members of your team, colleagues, or peers. Answer the questions there to reflect on this concept of the Box of Life.

All of the exercises in this book are included in a printable Resource Guide. You can find and download this Guide at www.livingasaleader.com/book.

The Box of Life

What are one or two recent examples when I've become frustrated or impatient when others don't do things "my way"?

Is it fair of me to think others should do things my way? Explain.

How will understanding the Box of Life help me to better lead others?

What is one opportunity I have right now to apply the Box of Life in an employee situation?

Everyone Wants to Feel Valued and Appreciated

We mentioned earlier that there are two ways to make the shift to other-centeredness. One is to remain aware, consciously and intentionally, that everyone has a Box of Life. Build the habits of asking questions and listening to understand other people, how they think, and how they see the situation at hand.

The other way to shift to other-centeredness is to realize that everyone wants to feel valued. On this topic, leaders may think that they're communicating their gratitude or appreciation for others. But the reality is, it may take more effort than you think to help others truly feel like they are appreciated.

The underlying issue starts with the brain and neurochemistry. When people receive or perceive criticism, their fight or flight defensiveness kicks in and produces a rush of cortisol, a hormone that shuts down the higher thinking part of our brains and activates protective behaviors. Have you ever stewed over criticism or what you thought was a slight? We all have. This brooding process then keeps producing more of the cortisol chemical and magnifies fear or anger even further, acting almost like a sustained-release pill of bitterness. The negative effects can last up to twenty-six hours. On the other hand, a compliment or positive conversation releases the feel-good bonding chemical oxytocin. The only problem? This positive chemical doesn't last as long as the defensive cortisol, as it is metabolized quicker in the brain. So, while praising others around you gives them a boost, one critical comment can quickly reverse the feeling and last much longer.[3]

This reality doesn't mean leaders should never provide constructive and critical feedback. Providing honest and helpful ways to correct behavior is necessary to being a leader. It also doesn't mean that leaders should wrap all of their critiques in fake compliments. It simply reminds us that leaders need to be mindful of the power of their words, especially the ratio

of complaints to compliments. It takes a sustained effort of intentionally noticing the good and genuinely showing appreciation to make people feel valued.

We often work with groups of leaders who have, for the first time, been introduced to the importance of catching people doing things right. When leaders are physically present with their teams, they can see little things going as planned. They can also see the hard work employees put in day in and day out—and recognize their value. Over time, employees will stop looking over their shoulders and feeling nervous about a rebuke from a boss. Instead, they will welcome the attention of their leaders seeing and complimenting a job well done. This exercise also trains leaders to see their people as people, not just as corrections that need to be made.

We tell leaders to treat their employees like they are wearing a big neon flashing sign that says MMFI—*Make Me Feel Important!* No one wears a big neon flashing sign that says *Kick Me Kick Me Kick Me.* One group of leaders we worked with began to see a big difference in employees within weeks of practicing making people feel important: less complaining, more working, and even increased smiling.

> MMFI—*Make Me Feel Important!*

One shared, "An employee recently told me that the only time he ever hears from me or anyone is if he's done something wrong. He told me that no one ever tells him when he is doing something right. So, I've made it a point to acknowledge the positive things I see. He really appreciates it and feels better about coming to work." Another leader shared, "Kevin is a new supervisor in our plant. He's been here for two months, and at the end of every day, I see him thanking his guys for coming in to work. This is so different from the supervisor who preceded him. I can already see a difference in the positivity and work efforts of these guys."

Because leaders tend to be self-starting and self-motivated, they often don't need praise or recognition. Therefore, they don't think others need it, either. Again, their own Box of Life limits their actions. Leaders may have the opinion, "Why in the world would I thank people for coming in to work? That is what they get paid to do." But pay alone doesn't inspire higher motivation. Factors like salary, health insurance, and working conditions are what psychologists call "hygiene factors," or the basic requirements for someone to take a job and show up to work each day. In contrast, meaningful praise is transformational and elevates people's desire to do more on the job. If showing appreciation for the small things will make a difference, why not show that appreciation?

The benefit of praise is not just about generating feel-good emotions, though that outcome is certainly one focus. It's also about results. Up to 30 percent of a company's financial results are determined by the climate of the organization, according to emotional intelligence expert and author Daniel Goleman, who was cited in a *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Leadership that Gets Results." Goleman also concluded that up to 70 percent of an employee's perception of the organization's climate is attributable to the actions and behaviors of his or her direct leader. The leader creates the environment that determines the mood of followers and their level of engagement and productivity. The leaders model the behavior, and the rest of the team follows suit.[4]

In the area of recognizing their teams, most leaders are falling down on the job. The impact of this lack of recognition is significant. Employees who report that they're not adequately recognized at work are three times more likely to say they'll quit in the next year[5]—that's because there's a direct link between praise and being engaged. The fact is that numerous studies show that the better leaders engage their employees, the better the bottom line. For example, Kenexa Research

Institute WorkTrends™ Report found that the top 25 percent of corporations, as measured by employee engagement, saw a five-year total shareholder return of 18 percent. The bottom 25 percent of corporations, as measured by employee engagement, saw an approximately 4 percent negative return for the same period. More recent evidence shows even more compelling results. One study illustrated the impact of extraordinary leaders on the bottom line. Using their research, they divided leaders into three categories and found that the bottom 10 percent of leaders saw a net loss of $1.2 million, while the middle 80 percent of leaders saw a gain of $2.4 million. The top 10 percent of leaders saw $4.5 million in gains.[6]

Long story short, poor leaders lost money, good leaders made money, and extraordinary leaders more than doubled the company's profits. And it all started with treating employees like they're human, praising them when appropriate and recognizing their value.

Reflection: Who Needs Positive Feedback?

On the following page, take a few minutes to think about your team or others you work closely with. Isolate one person you can acknowledge for good work. Then, plan out a conversation using the notes provided and have the conversation.

Who Needs Positive Feedback?

1. Select an employee on your team (or someone you work with closely) who is overdue for some positive feedback from you.

2. How will you deliver the feedback (email, phone, handwritten note? Privately or publicly? "On the fly" or in a scheduled conversation)?

3. What specific examples will you cite about their effective behavior or performance?

4. What is the positive impact of their behavior or performance on the team, the organization, or customers?

5. What is a question you can ask to engage the person in conversation about their behavior or performance?

Seeing People as People

The next time we worked with Tim, he had moved on after twenty-three years with his last company to take a senior vice president role in a family-owned bottling company with multiple locations throughout the country. The corporate headquarters is located on the edge of a small town. Farm equipment dots the landscape as you drive to the plant. Tim's office is a modest room adjacent to the bottling lines. Behind his desk are bottles manufactured in the plant alongside leadership books. His chair looks out to a map that shows the locations of the company's plants spread out across the country.

In his new role, Tim called us in to meet with his senior leadership team and begin working with the leaders throughout the organization. They had been using the same practices for decades, but now there was added pressure as new trends disrupted the beverage industry. After fifty years in business, it was time to innovate, evolve, and compete—all to help ensure a successful next half-century.

The situation was different this time, but the techniques were the same. Tim didn't want to tell everyone how to do things his way. His first priorities were to get buy-in, meet his team, and build goodwill. One of his first steps was to schedule ongoing one-on-ones with his leaders. This was a new concept to many in the organization.

"When I first started scheduling these with people, they said, '*What are these?*'" Tim remembered. "For folks who aren't accustomed to them, they first think, *I'm in trouble*."

This is a common reaction. At another company, someone dressed up for their first one-on-one, not sure if it was a performance review or a firing. The intention, again, isn't to catch people doing something wrong. Correction can happen later if necessary. Instead, these meetings are about catching your people doing something *right*. And even more fundamental,

it's about getting to know them as people. One-on-ones help you find out where their pain points are, how team members are doing on their work and projects, and what they need from you for resources or removing obstacles. One-on-ones are about connection, relationship-building, *and* results. We encourage leaders to make it clear that no one's in trouble—one-on-ones are for everyone's benefit.

"First couple times I did one-on-ones with my team, the reaction was, 'Gee whiz, this is great! I've never had this experience before,'" Tim said. "I heard things like, 'Thank you for taking the time because no one is listening to me.' These are things we take for granted that don't happen, but they should be happening. I don't get people who don't spend time with their folks."

Now he schedules one-on-ones on his calendar to get to know and engage each member of his team. We're not talking about the drive-by conversations that are a part of daily work and interaction. One-on-ones are private, formally scheduled conversations with employees that occur with a consistent cadence, such as weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. Some organizations we work with call them check-in sessions or touch bases. A standing agenda for one-on-ones can include: What's gone well since our last one-on-one? What challenges have you faced? What do you need to accomplish between now and our next one-on-one? How can I support you? The benefits of one-on-ones include self-monitoring and ownership by the employee, open communication, focus on priorities, and better relationships and support. For Tim, one-on-ones help him keep lines of communication open. *How are you doing? What help can I provide you?* He calls it Leadership 101.

Over time, Tim has goals to create more advanced leadership and implement change measures. He has hired new engineering and information technology leaders, and he wants to put in place a "scoreboard" so the team has performance

metrics and knows if they're headed in the right direction. But all of that will come later. His team has to first know that this new figure in the organization cares about them. It starts, simply, with treating them as fully human.

Maybe it's no coincidence that Tim's last name is . . . Peoples. He has the skill of seeing people as people.

Action Step: Interview Your Team

One-on-one conversations, as Tim's experience shows, are one of the best ways to create alliances, forge connections, and build relationships with your team members. Over time, these conversations with each individual enable you to learn and understand what makes them tick, where their passions and strengths lie, and how they can contribute to the team according to their unique talents, perspectives, and gifts. Most important, they help you learn how you can be the best leader for each unique person on your team.

The action step on the next page provides a set of questions to ask each team member in a private conversation. You can use all of the questions, a selection of them, or add your own. Even if you already have regular one-on-ones with your team members, make this interview a "special" meeting. Frame it up for them simply as a chance for you to get to know them better and learn how they see the operations of the team.

During the conversation, remember to "let them hold the ball" and do the talking while you "peel the onion" with your questions. Also, ask follow-up questions that come to mind as you listen to understand their perspectives and points of view.

Be sure to take notes along the way as well. These interviews will provide you with a lot of good information that you can put into action.

Interview Your Team

1. What do you like most about your work?

2. What do you like least?

3. What are some things I most need to know about you?

4. What are you passionate about?

5. What are your dreams and goals, both personal and career?

6. What is working well on our team?

7. What is not working well on our team?

8. What are your suggestions for how we can make these things better?

2

LEADERSHIP IS A DIFFERENT SKILL SET

Gene and Steve started working at a small architectural firm in the late 1960s. In their twenties, they formed a friendship and partnered on projects together. Over time, they started to move up in the company hierarchy as the firm expanded from Milwaukee to Chicago to Minneapolis, Florida and beyond.

Through the decades, the company developed a strong reputation for creating innovative multifamily housing and senior living spaces. By the late 1990s, Steve and Gene found themselves at the top of a successful company with more than fifty employees. They took over, re-branded and put their own mark on the firm.

Outwardly, their company looked successful. Inside, they didn't exactly know the best way to lead their employees. They could continue to follow the management model they grew up with—making unilateral decisions as the partners of the firm—but that didn't feel like the best approach.

Like most architects, Gene said he had abundant skills to design buildings, but leading people was a completely different thing—and it wasn't what he went to school for.

Looking back today, Gene can remember only one leadership training experience in his fifty-two-year career, which he says he stumbled upon by accident. It was a series of workshops in the late 1970s about being assertive. Gene tried out the new techniques, but he didn't like having these types of discussions with his team. They were awkward and didn't come naturally to him.

"I had to really build up my courage to do that," he remembered. "When Steve and I were running this company, we didn't want to upset people. We would cover for you but not fire you."

So the training was forgotten. Instead, if someone wasn't pulling their weight, Gene figured out how to get the work done, even if that meant long nights or weekends or doing it himself.

But that approach was not sustainable. When Steve retired and with Gene approaching his seventies, he started to feel his mortality creeping in. Looking ahead five to ten years, he suddenly couldn't imagine running the company in the same fashion at that age. But he also didn't want to just be "put out to pasture," as he calls it. He wanted to be intentional about turning the company—that bears the last name initials from him and Steve—over into good hands. He needed strong leaders, not just great architects. He needed to hear from his team and from others. He needed feedback that would help.

That's when he came to us. After fifty years in the business, it was time to build an intentional leadership structure—one that empowers and puts trust in those around him, one that equips leaders with the tools to be successful and sustainable so he could turn the company over to them.

"I so much enjoy what I do," he explained of his work as an architect. "My work is a great joy, and I like doing it. But for decades, I have also felt like I'm the only guy with the skills to do this."

But he wouldn't be around forever. After his departure, change would be necessary if the company were going to move forward.

Parallel Lines

As he struggled with his transition from architect to leader and finally to preparing the next generation of leaders, Gene found himself in a situation like many people who are skilled and specialized in a technical area of expertise. We call it the parallel lines problem. Here's how it works.

Most leaders, Gene included, begin as high-performing individual contributors who do their jobs very well. Over time, these high performers find themselves taking on new projects and bigger assignments, developing their knowledge and abilities in the functions of their work, even garnering more pay and responsibility. Then a leadership position opens, and success at their job leads to a promotion. The best machinist becomes the team lead, the best nurse becomes the nurse supervisor, and the best salesperson becomes the sales manager.

Technical Expertise — Leadership Expertise
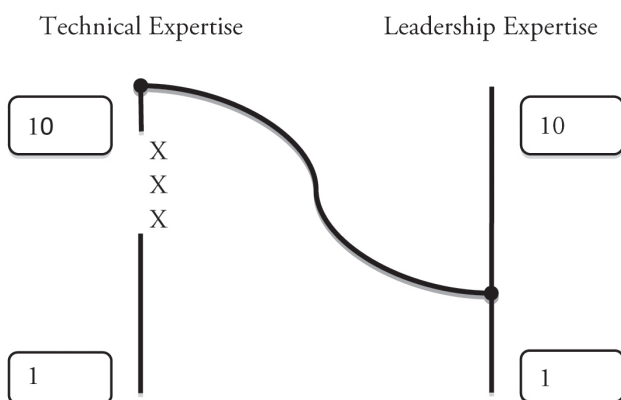
This phenomenon is true in most areas of life.

So how is this a problem? Simply put: Just because Gene was a great architect didn't automatically mean he'd be a great leader of other architects. Designing a building isn't the same as having a difficult conversation with an employee on your team. Leadership requires different ways of thinking and, ultimately, completely different skills.

> LEADERSHIP REQUIRES DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING AND, ULTIMATELY, COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SKILLS.

Growing Your Team

> Before you become a leader, success is all about growing yourself. After you become a leader, success is about growing others.
>
> —Jack Welch

Too often, a high performer who becomes the leader rests on the assumption that her high-performing nature will translate to effective leadership. But as we said before, leadership is about getting results through other people. And people are not like projects—humans are messy and complicated.

> "BEFORE YOU BECOME A LEADER, SUCCESS IS ALL ABOUT GROWING YOURSELF. AFTER YOU BECOME A LEADER, SUCCESS IS ABOUT GROWING OTHERS."
> —JACK WELCH

That said, high performers do instinctively lead one group of employees well—other high performers. These workers are familiar to them. They often share the same talent, ability to learn, and work ethic. With them, the leader assigns the job, and it gets done well and on time. It's easy.

But what about other members of the team?

The new leader may believe that leadership should entail nothing more than this: Set an expectation, and it gets done right the first time. These leaders, who often represent the top 10 percent of the workforce, don't think of themselves as the exception but rather as the standard for everyone's work. This leads them to struggle when leading average workers or low performers—the ones who need the most leadership to grow—to help them become better performers and to reach their potential. In these situations, leaders can become frustrated and intolerant when asked to provide more support or direction than they themselves needed. They might even lash out at the team members who don't seem to "get it."

We have also seen leaders go the other way. Their approach to underperformance by team members is to pick up the slack for them—as Gene used to do. They simply do the work themselves, or, worse yet, they assign it to a high performer on the team. While this might get the work done, it often leads to over-burdening the leader or high performer, and it doesn't do anything to help the low performer get better.

Eventually, many leaders realize that their promotion to leadership doesn't mean they have the skills needed for it. There is a new learning curve every leader must embark on. As Gene and others who become leaders discover, leadership isn't just a continuation of the same line of developing and executing on their technical skills. Leadership is a whole new space. It's a line parallel from where they started.

Reflection: Common Skills of an Effective Leader

Let's be clear about something. We're not saying your technical knowledge and skill aren't valuable when you become the leader. In fact, your technical expertise can be the very

thing that helps you to coach, guide, and grow the members of your team.

What we are saying is that to be effective as leaders, we need to learn and develop additional skills and behaviors in order to get the results we desire from our teams. The good news is, leadership is learnable. It's not rocket science. Effective leadership is about taking what's common sense and turning it into common practice. For example, it's common sense that people want to be treated respectfully. Treat people respectfully. It's common sense that people need to clearly know what's expected of them to be successful at work. Set clear expectations.

On the following page, you'll find a selection of common skills, behaviors, and characteristics that enable you to engage people effectively to get desired results. Read each statement and rate yourself on how effectively you demonstrate this in your role as a leader. As you rate yourself, take stock of where your strengths lie and where you have opportunities to improve.

Rating Yourself

1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always

1. I understand that everyone comes from a different place—with different skill levels, experiences, perspectives, preferences, etc.

$$1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5$$

2. I treat people respectfully at all times.

$$1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5$$

3. I'm humble as a leader—I know "it's not about me."

$$1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5$$

4. When I'm frustrated, I manage my emotions.

$$1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5$$

5. I ask questions to involve others in problem-solving and decision-making.

$$1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5$$

6. I listen to people when they speak—not just to hear but to understand.

$$1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5$$

7. I set clear expectations with others.

$$1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5$$

8. I routinely communicate priorities and performance metrics.

$$1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5$$

9. I coach my employees to help them learn and grow.

$$1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5$$

10. I provide positive, reinforcing feedback when things go well.

$$1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5$$

11. I provide improvement-oriented feedback when people are off track.

$$1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5$$

12. I recognize and reward employees for the good work they do.

$$1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5$$

Blind Spots

The list of skills, behaviors, and characteristics above is by no means exhaustive, but it provides a solid starting point for building awareness of how to increase leadership effectiveness. It shows how leadership expertise is different from technical expertise.

Such self-reflection is a powerful way to identify opportunities for developing as a leader. But it's just a starting point. Unfortunately, leadership gaps and deficiencies aren't always obvious to leaders. After all, they've been highly skilled at what they were originally trained to do for their careers. When they become leaders, they don't know what they don't know—they are "unconsciously incompetent," a term coined by Noel Burch in the 1970s in his work with Gordon Training International. Their training model proposes that acquiring new skills requires passing through four stages: Unconsciously unskilled, consciously unskilled, consciously skilled and finally unconsciously skilled.[7] In other words, leaders have to first see what's lacking in their skillset before they can learn, practice, and improve. Eventually, over time, their leadership skills become second nature.

But sometimes, leaders can go years ignoring or not seeing issues right in front of them. They may even wait until the end of their careers—when it's time to turn over the company (or their role) to someone else—until they deal with deep-seated leadership issues that could have been festering for years.

To make matters worse, leaders aren't always fully aware of their leadership issues because two things limit their visibility to their blind spots. The first limitation is that most employees don't willingly point out the boss's failures and foibles—at least not to the boss. Your people might talk to each other about your shortcomings as a leader, but they likely won't tell you. Second, as leaders, we don't typically *ask* for feedback on our

leadership. We assume that everything is going well since no one's telling us anything different (refer to the first limitation). This reinforcing loop—not getting feedback and not asking for it—leaves us in the dark as to where our true leadership-development opportunities lie. Yet one of the best sources to learn what to improve in your leadership are the very people who are the recipients of it. The people you impact.

Without feedback, leaders can appear hypocritical. They may see the problems in colleagues or their direct reports but not notice the glaring issues in themselves that everyone else talks about behind their backs. Leaders are often more aware of how they are being treated than how they are treating the people around them. One of our clients who treats his employees terribly—we're working on this—has a sign in his office that reads "Honesty, Respect, Integrity… Always." Until we brought the hypocrisy of this sign to his attention, he had not consciously thought about his treatment of people. Like most people, leaders are keenly aware of when they are being mistreated but are blind to their mistreatment of others.

Beyond Self-Reflection

The productive alternative is for you to find a mechanism to get feedback on your leadership—feedback on what you're doing well and what you're not doing well.

Organizations use a variety of methods to help leaders get feedback about the impact of their leadership. They administer surveys, create focus groups for airing concerns, provide telephone or web-based hotlines, and hang suggestion boxes.

One of the most effective ways for leaders to get feedback is for the organization to enlist a companywide engagement survey. Engagement surveys give the organization insight into a variety of issues that are connected to employee engagement, including the impact that leaders have on their teams. The

survey provides data that the organization can then use to identify and leverage its strengths and to build action plans to address the real issues in the organization.

The term employee engagement was first coined in the early 1990s and is credited to Frank Schmidt, a professor at the University of Iowa who is also a researcher for the Gallup Organization. Gallup has been at the front end of employee engagement information since the 1990s when they first started to notice a relationship between the sense of connection that employees feel to their organizations and the performance of those organizations. Over and over, research shows evidence of the costs and benefits of disengaged or engaged employees. When there is low employee engagement, organizations pay the price in absenteeism, turnover, increased accidents, and lost productivity. On the flip side, a highly engaged workforce brings greater productivity, higher customer satisfaction, and organizational profitability.

What Gallup and many other research organizations have found is that employee engagement—this emotional and psychological connection that employees feel toward their work experience—is rooted in three areas: 1) How the employee feels about their own work (the job itself, their sense of contribution, whether they have the tools and resources they need); 2) How the employee feels about the organization (its goals, mission, values, senior leadership team); and 3) How the employee feels about his or her direct leader. This third area is the key for you in developing your leadership. Research has consistently shown that you, as a leader, have the greatest single impact on employee engagement. Gallup's research argues that up to 70 percent of the variance between disengagement and engagement in your team ties back to you as the direct leader.[8]

Data from engagement surveys can start to help you spot problem areas. It's no longer about a few employees complaining if you can see the data of an entire team or department

through their ratings and feelings about their work environment. Engagement surveys can benchmark your results against other similar companies in your industry to see how you compare. Ideally, these same engagement surveys should be repeated every few years to see if employee engagement goes up or down over time.

If your organization conducts an engagement survey (or another type of employee-satisfaction survey), study the results from your slice of the organization. Look for clues on what you can do in your leadership to better fill the gaps or meet the needs of your team.

An even better tool for gaining insight into your leadership skills is a 360-degree feedback assessment, also called a 360. These assessments take into account multiple levels of feedback from your direct reports, boss, colleagues, and those inside and outside the organization. A 360 gives you a full and targeted picture of your performance, key strengths, and areas for improvement. Specifically, a 360 gives you feedback on how you impact the various constituent groups you interact with and influence, especially your team of direct reports (who, as we said, often won't give you all the feedback you need). A 360 operates anonymously—you won't know what each person said (other than your boss)—but your 360 report will give you ratings and comments bundled by each constituent group. Armed with this comprehensive feedback, you will be able to identify key themes within and across the groups to create an action plan for developing skills and behaviors that will enable you to more effectively lead, influence, and communicate with other people.

If your organization offers a 360 process for you to use, use it. Contact your human resources representative right now to find out and get it going. And if your organization doesn't currently have a 360 available, before we close this chapter, we'll show you a similar process you can do on your own.

A New World

Throughout his career, no one ever trained Gene on how to become an effective leader, so he followed his instincts—for better or worse. As a result, his journey on a parallel track of technical and leadership skills was needlessly more difficult than it needed to be. But the good news is it's never too late to open your eyes.

For a half-century, Gene had been finding ways to go along to get along. But Gene knew that strategy was not an effective way to lead in the current workplace environment. He had to step up as a leader. To that end, Gene felt an urgency to get support in two areas—developing and implementing a succession plan for himself as he was looking to leave the company and building the skills of his leadership team rather than leaving them to figure things out on their own.

"One of our goals was to create a culture of leadership," he said. "In giving attention to the future of leadership in our company, one of the biggest things we learned is how to differentiate between doing and leading. We are very accomplished doers. We are not very accomplished leaders."

One eye-opening moment for Gene was accepting the fact that coaching others is what's expected from a leader. He realized that the "assertive conversations" techniques from the 1970s weren't enough. Rather, he learned through his work with us to truly have a dialogue and open conversations with his team. He learned that he needed to hear their feedback and understand what they needed from him, understand their challenges, and work with them and teach them how to solve some of their challenges.

"In the old world, a team lead or project manager would say, 'This person is not performing well, but I'll make up the difference to compensate,'" he said. "The new model is now, as leaders, we need to have a conversation with this person.

Here are my expectations, and do we have an agreement that you'll meet these expectations? And if you're not meeting these expectations, here's what we need, let's keep talking about this. It's supposed to be a two-way conversation. There has to be buy-in. For us, that's all a new world."

We worked with Gene to put in leadership principles and empower leaders around him. They created teams to develop workplace expectations, train employees, update technology, and provide personal enrichment. Gene observed and responded to generational changes that would help the company attract, retain, and develop young talent.

"No one comes to work to be a robot like I might have been when I was younger," he said. "They want full lives."

Gene opened his eyes, invited feedback from his team, noticed leadership gaps for himself and others, and took steps to build a comprehensive plan for leadership development and succession. This gave him a path to retire from his company with confidence and peace of mind. It gave him control of his legacy.

"What I have found in this whole process is the ability to let go and see that there are people who are stepping up in response," he said. "They are stepping up in the same way that I did when I was their age."

Today, he calls this a light at the end of the tunnel.

"Now I feel," he said, "like the company is in good hands."

Action Step: Get Feedback

So many things demand your time and attention, and unfortunately, the task side of your role can often prevent you from doing justice to the leadership of your people. It's time to make a conscious, intentional effort to swing the pendulum toward growing and developing your skills as a leader.

Begin the process by getting feedback on your leadership from your team. If your organization offers a 360-degree

feedback tool, work with your human resources team to get a 360 going for you. If you don't have access to a 360, here is a highly effective exercise that works the same way.

We call this exercise "Keep, Stop, Start." It involves asking your direct reports to answer four simple questions (which you'll find on the next page). Just follow these steps:

1. Type the questions on the next page into a blank document.

2. Communicate to your team that you are going to ask them to participate in an exercise to give you anonymous feedback. Let them know that the purpose of the exercise is for you to get honest feedback about your leadership—what's working and what's not.

3. Send an electronic copy of the document you created to each of your direct reports. Ask them to answer the four questions, then print the document. Provide a way for them to deposit the document anonymously (e.g., have them put it in your physical mailbox or give it to someone outside the team who has agreed to collect the documents for you).

4. When all documents are in, read them. Look for the common themes that are coming up under each question. Make note of the top two or three themes for each question in an action plan for yourself.

5. Share your action plan with your team. Hold a team discussion or one-on-one discussions to get their reactions to your plan. Discuss ways they can hold you accountable.

6. Modify your plan as necessary, given their additional feedback and reactions. Share the plan with your boss. And begin working your plan!

Keep, Stop, Start

1. What do I do as a leader that you like and want me to KEEP doing?

2. What do I do as a leader that you don't like and want me to STOP doing?

3. What am I not doing as a leader that you want me to START doing?

4. What else would you like to share about my leadership and me?

3

SLOWING DOWN TO SPEED UP

Kent was shocked to see the box of cereal on Dave's desk. When he noticed it, Kent knew that this unusual decoration symbolized the breakthrough he had been seeking. He just never thought it would come from Dave, a guy who Kent described bluntly as "hard-assed." Then Dave told Kent how meaningful the box of cereal was to him and how they had to remember it whenever making decisions. Dave even started tearing up.

Why was an everyday breakfast staple making Dave so sentimental? Spoiler alert: It wasn't about the cereal.

Let's back up to 2007 when Kent joined a multi-national manufacturing company that developed parts for automobile engines. Kent had recently been promoted from his human resources manager role to become the new global leadership development manager, and he was tasked to spearhead the next phase in the burgeoning global company's growth. Previously, leadership development training was almost non-existent at the company. To take the next step, the company would have to start giving leaders the tools they needed to grow.

"Our pain point was that we had not had a training and development function within the organization for twenty years," Kent

said. "We basically had a generation or two of leaders in charge who had never been trained how to do things the right way."

We first met Kent in 2012 at a small workshop held in the town that housed one of his company's plants. Our timing could not have been better since he had been researching leadership development consultants and was nearing his decision-making moment. We slipped in just in time and provided exactly what he was hoping to find. In short order, we partnered with Kent to begin facilitating training sessions and small group coaching for his leadership team.

"Having been both a trainer and leader of training organizations in the past, I knew the learning curve and the forgetting curve. So many people walk out of a training session and then rarely apply it," he said. "What stood out to me as a differentiator was small group coaching. That became my absolute favorite part. We've deployed the small group coaching concept throughout all kinds of training across the organization to make the lessons and applications stick."

Working with Kent more broadly across the organization, we implemented our comprehensive approach to developing leaders. The simple formula included our curriculum of twelve four-hour interactive workshops supported by small group coaching and a variety of content reinforcements, including real-time practice exercises, eLearning, a mobile app, and additional support tools. Over the years, our work with leaders in the company contributed to a full-company turnaround by helping to rebuild their human resources organization, establish a learning and development function, build stronger leaders, create a people development and growth mindset culture, lead change management, embed innovation into the culture, and establish talent management. It was a tall order for one of our most important clients to date.

Kent noticed that his company lacked a culture centered around people. To remedy that early on, we practiced our Box

of Life training with about 120 leaders and top contributors in the company. The goal was to return to focusing on people, not just results.

"Our pendulum had swung all the way to the results side of the equation," Kent remembered. "The other side of that equation is relationships. The Living As A Leader curriculum helped us swing that pendulum from all about results back to how we get results with people."

As you'll recall, the Box of Life is an exercise that helps leaders become other-centered. They start to consider all the hidden motivations, struggles, experiences, circumstances, and other factors that go into people's actions. It helps leaders dig below the surface and see people as people. It also helps leaders to slow down to act, rather than producing knee-jerk reactions that can misread the situation and compound problems.

It was after these Box of Life sessions that Dave went out and bought several boxes of Life . . . *cereal*. He handed them out to everyone who went through our workshop, placing them on desks as a reminder. Kent recalls that Dave is someone who was born in New York and built his career in the hardscrabble plants of Detroit—not exactly someone given to sentimentality. And yet he realized it's counterproductive to rush to execution without slowing down to first understand the people who get the results. This is when Kent noticed the box of Life cereal on Dave's desk. At that point, Kent knew the lessons had taken root and would endure in the company.

"He told me how meaningful that was and that we have to remember it whenever we're making decisions—and he got teary and sentimental," Kent recalls. "Subsequently, from working with him, I learned that he was a pretty sentimental guy. He went on to build a team and become a relationship-oriented guy. You couldn't take the hard-ass out of him, but he softened it a bit."

This reminds us of another example in a different organization. After learning concepts related to the Box of Life and

"people as people," a gentleman in the room shared, "I am so ashamed of myself—for how I have treated people for thirty years. I didn't know any of this stuff. No one ever taught me this stuff."

Although transformations don't happen overnight, we have seen dramatic examples. Most commonly, we focus on helping leaders see the big picture, understand people and root causes, and slow down to act. We move from short-term BAND-AIDs® to long-term solutions. Years later, the boxes of Life cereal can still be seen on shelves and desks at Kent's company as reminders of this lesson.

It's a paradox of leadership that to move forward faster, leaders need to slow down.

The Need for Less Speed

> I apologize for such a long letter. I didn't have time to write a short one.
>
> —Mark Twain

How fast are you reading this right now?

Are you skimming? Scanning? Scrolling? Moving on? Thinking about your next meeting, picking up the kids, closing a deal, or planning dinner tonight? Did you get distracted?

How about this:

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Did the Message Get Through?

In the last few decades, the pace of our lives and the sheer volume of information has sped up dramatically. We are always connected to devices that send us breaking news, emails from colleagues, tracking updates on the real-time delivery of packages, texts from friends and family, and other non-stop pings, buzzes, and push notifications. In this information-saturated environment, we no longer simply read, for instance. We scan headlines and bullet points. We may soak up tidbits of data all day, but this leaves us little time to process and make sense of everything. The need for speed obscures the ability to see the big picture and create real, lasting change.

Leaders need to slow down because people need it. As leadership guru Stephen Covey has said: "Efficiency with people is ineffective. With people, fast is slow and slow is fast."[2]

This is because the human brain also hasn't completely caught up with the pace of today's digital age. You may quickly scroll through Instagram or Facebook and thumbs up and heart all the posts you like. But that's not the same as truly understanding and leading people. For that to work, there's no shortcut. When leaders try to circumvent this step, they end up creating more obstacles around them. We've seen that time and again. Like Mark Twain's reference to his long letter, we try to do more by rushing through things—but just cramming in more information ends up as rambling background noise. What gets lost when we speed up is clarity and precision. Better to take your time with a proverbial "short letter" that highlights what's really important.

One leader we worked with brought extensive experience from previous global roles—and then sought to quickly implement what he thought was best into a new organization. One employee described him as "moving very fast, almost to the point of barreling through." He did not stop to ask why things

were done the way they were before trying to steamroll new practices into place. "Initially, while he said he was open to suggestions, his actions did not show it," one team member wrote in his 360 review. "We were making process changes on the fly based on how he did things at his prior company, even though the businesses were very different. Many hours and much frustration took place during this transition." The leader's reviews went on like that for quite a while, so in the interest of time, here's just one more nugget: "He has *no* appreciation for the time and effort it takes to meet his ever-changing wishes," one person wrote. "He expects everything NOW." (Emphasis original.) Ironically, in an attempt to save time and effort, this leader was making the process longer and more difficult—if not impossible.

If this person had just taken some time to slow down and listen, his employees would have warmed to him quicker. His team didn't mind improving where it was needed, but they also would have appreciated, as one employee put it, "demonstrating some respect for our success." This employee noted that "many times he is right about the need to change, but it feels like no current processes are effective when he speaks." Another person bemoaned that "it's his way or no way. That may be fine, but getting agreement, and at least listening and appreciating other opinions, would go a long way even if he plans to do it his own way—but he just brushes you off," this person added. Simply acknowledging current successes and the people behind them would have fostered a spirit of cooperation rather than resistance. As one employee noted simply, "I would like to see him make an attempt to have more informal day-to-day interaction with department members." They were craving time to bond and understand each other.

There's a proverb that often gets quoted in leadership training: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. But for many leaders, it's a natural tendency

to quickly jump to coming up with solutions. They fix problems. They implement standard operating procedures. They assume they know all the answers and the best way forward. So why delay?

> IF YOU WANT TO GO FAST, GO ALONE. IF YOU WANT TO GO FAR, GO TOGETHER.

This approach may have worked in their previous roles when solutions were relatively simple and straight-forward. But as leaders, there are more moving parts. People and systems are complex. This requires a new approach that may seem counterintuitive at first. Leaders need to slow down, see the avenues to reach their goal, and build connections and buy-in before they act.

Leaders may also need to shift their timetable horizons when thinking about their people. It's easy to get caught up in a to-do list of what needs to get done by the end of the day, week, or quarter. And those tasks are important. But they also need to be balanced with an overarching goal of nurturing and developing people's talents—and that takes time. Certain crucial behaviors and activities of good leadership take patience: Listening, employee involvement that asks for team member's suggestions and ideas, coaching, having meaningful conversations, setting clear expectations, explaining the "whys" behind a change, and letting other people speak or share concerns. As Max DePree writes in *Leadership Is an Art*, "Effectiveness comes about through enabling others to reach their potential—both their personal potential and their corporate or institutional potential."[9] Leadership isn't about extracting as much as you can from others in the short term, which can lead to burnout, fatigue, or resentment. Instead, being patient and helping develop those around you leads to an even bigger reward.

Leaders also need to slow down—not just because their people need to develop, grow, and learn from others who can

help and mentor them. It's also critical for leaders to take time to connect with people in deep and broad ways. Harvard psychology professor Dr. Robert Putnam defined connection—which he calls social capital—in two ways: *Bridging*, which brings together people of different backgrounds (widening your network), and *bonding* that brings together people of similar backgrounds and interests (deepening your network).[10] According to this theory, networks can either build weak ties or reinforce existing relationships. Leaders need both of these social capital building blocks before they start to implement. For this, they need to go deep and move outward. This takes time.

When leaders are new or growing in their role, they need to build a support system. This includes establishing open communication with supervisors and direct reports, but it also means building an informal network of insiders and knowledgeable colleagues who can "show you the ropes." Bridging and bonding with those around you can help you discover information that isn't in the employee job manual. Building this rapport means internal networking and treating your own people with the respect and attention you'd give someone who was giving a TED Talk or an important connection you met at a conference. It could mean joining the company kickball team, going to lunch with colleagues instead of eating at your desk, or leaving notes of gratitude on someone's desk. It can take many forms depending on your style, but the end result is deepened trust and understanding with those who work together. This may feel like it's taking time now, but it's an investment that will pay compound interest later.

As you slow down and become patient with others, it helps to think about people who were patient with you when you needed it. Who in your own network has modeled understanding? Who has listened to you when you needed it? Who has patiently asked for your feedback and involvement? Who has had meaningful conversations with you that made you feel

seen? When you are struggling with slowing down, keep these examples in mind. In the next section, we'll help you find and visualize these models of your "best coach" so you can bring them to mind when they are most needed.

Reflection: Your Best Coach

> Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance. It's helping them to learn rather than teaching them.
>
> —Tim Gallwey

Most if not all of us, somewhere in our past, have a "best coach." Those great coaches leave us clues as to how we can slow down to be effective as leaders.

Who was your best coach ever? Think back over your life. Hopefully, in your work, you had a boss who was a great coach for you, but your best coach might have been a sports coach from high school, a debate or forensics coach, a mentor, counselor, parent, teacher, choir director, friend, family member, or pastor.

Who was your best coach ever?

Now, with your best coach firmly in mind, consider this question: What did your best coach do (specific behaviors) when interacting and communicating with you?

On the next page, brainstorm answers to this question. Try to come up with three to five answers.

My Best Coach

What did your best coach do (specific behaviors) when interacting and communicating with you?

Best Coach Behaviors

We've done this same exercise about your "best coach" with hundreds of leaders, and every time a startling thing happens. You might have had the same experience as they do.

As we said, our best coaches give us clues as to how we sometimes need to slow down to lead most effectively. Take a look at your list on the previous page. Circle the behaviors that required your coach to slow down and take time in order to help you learn, grow, expand your capabilities, and perform at a higher level.

Here are some of the common answers we get when we ask leaders to list the behaviors of their best coaches.

- Listened

- Spent time with me

- Invested in me

- Asked for my ideas

- Let me try things and even fail

- Let me learn

- Asked me questions

How many of these kinds of answers showed up on your list? The remarkable thing is that the vast majority of answers leaders give about their best coaches involve behaviors that need time and require slowing down to let the process unfold and evolve.

A great coach knows that you aren't going to learn it all in one day, so they don't rush to see results immediately. Even Lebron James didn't dunk a shot his first day on the court. So instead, coaches focus on developing fundamentals, one step

at a time. They get to know your strengths and weaknesses. Then they focus on developing and honing your skills, one by one. They do drills. Team bonding. Practices. Scrimmages. Again and again. It takes time and patience. Helping others become their best self takes longer than doing it yourself, but it's longer-lasting. Good coaching helps people move forward productively, just as your best coaches helped do for you.

Ask yourself: How well am I slowing down and taking the time to give my people what they need to grow and perform?

Remember what Stephen Covey said: "Efficiency with people is ineffective. With people, fast is slow and slow is fast."

Slowing Down for Ourselves

Many people spend more time planning their summer vacations or their holidays than thinking about who they want to be as a person or as a leader. That's why in our leadership development process, we carve out time at the beginning to provide the opportunity to do soul-searching, to consider what kind of person you want to become. Thinking about your best coach and emulating what they did is one way to build your leadership expertise. Developing as a leader is a journey, and the reality is, it takes a long time. As leaders approach this personal and professional learning curve, they'll want to think about their professional goals but also their personal motivations. To understand others, you have to first understand yourself. As ancient Greek sages instructed: *Nosce te ipsum.* Know thyself.

In our experience, we've seen that leaders can make measurable improvement early on in their development process when they start with slowing down and knowing themselves. This process takes time too. You can start by looking at data from an engagement survey or 360 assessment from your team. That's also why we do the exercises in this book for deeper

understanding. If you are not yet grasping all of the characteristics of a great leader, be patient with yourself and with others and simply acknowledge that you have work ahead of you on your leadership learning journey. Great leaders are not made overnight. Developing as a leader is a lifelong pursuit. Leaders are made throughout a lifetime of steady progress, continuous improvement, and honest self-reflection. There's never a finish line for becoming a better leader. Just as if you were to take up golf or practice public speaking, there's always an aspect you can work on and refine. Developing new skills as a leader means, with practice, developing them into regular and improved habits.

For example, in one of our customer organizations, a department manager was an extremely analytical guy. He was highly competent in some areas, but he had blind spots that needed intentionality to improve over time. Part of the training process included each of the leaders gaining more self-awareness. In doing so, this manager became aware that some of the people in the company did not like him. They felt that he was not very friendly. As an analytical person, his friendlier side played second fiddle to his logical, pragmatic side. He had no idea how people felt and was certainly not being unfriendly on purpose.

Once he realized the issue, it took time and deliberate action to change perceptions others had of him. He had to take a step back. The change didn't happen overnight. As part of his intentional leadership approach, he identified a few key behaviors he could practice. He made a point of coming out of his office twice a day to chat with some of his staff members. "I might ask them something about their weekend or give them some positive feedback about something they were working on. I'd even try to smile more often," explained the manager. Just a few minutes each day, over time, made a huge impact. These simple gestures, rooted in practicing new behaviors,

are examples of leading by design, or intentional leadership. And the approach worked—people noticed the difference. And they were willing to take the journey with him.

As a great Chinese proverb tells us: "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now." So whether you started on your leadership journey twenty years ago or you're just getting started, make it your intention to keep it moving forward.

> WHETHER YOU STARTED ON YOUR LEADERSHIP JOURNEY TWENTY YEARS AGO OR YOU'RE JUST GETTING STARTED, MAKE IT YOUR INTENTION TO KEEP IT MOVING FORWARD.

Forward with Integrity

Remember the leader who rubbed everyone the wrong way by his impatience and wanting everything now, now, *now*?

Things actually got better over time.

One employee wrote in the leader's next 360 review: "The first six to twelve months I had a very difficult time—his way was 'best' without understanding why we did things the way we did. But I also have to admit that he has gotten better over time. Perhaps it's just my relationship with him, but I've seen significant improvement. Maybe we've gotten more used to each other. There are still issues, but not like it used to be. He made some impressions early that were not favorable, but I have had the opportunity to work with him enough to change my initial impression."

That's the thing about time: It may not heal all wounds, but it can at least make a bad situation better. If the leader had been more patient earlier, he could have saved a lot of conflict and ill will during the first year. Think about how much more progress he could have made by simply being more patient and moving slower. We realize that the business

world is a results-oriented culture. There is a lot of pressure to perform. Leaders sometimes feel like they don't have the "luxury" to move at what feels like slower progress, even if they are hurting their cause in the long run with excessive speed.

The antidote to moving forward haphazardly is to intentionally design how to behave for the best results. This is why we frequently reiterate the need to get feedback from your team so you can use that data to start intentionally designing your growth as a leader. Most leaders have good intentions. No one wakes up in the morning and thinks, *I wonder whose day I can ruin?* They want their team members to be effective. They want to be able to lead well. They want to help people grow and contribute. They want to be seen as good leaders. They want to be liked by their people. We believe, deep down, that the vast majority of leaders—including the person reading this—are good people with good values. They want to do good in the world. To accomplish this, it's necessary to lead by design.

We have a model we call Integrity Circles. It helps us to understand the impact of our behavior as leaders.

Integrity Circles
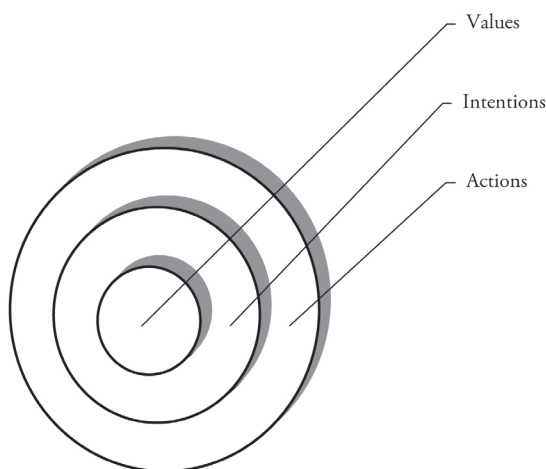
Imagine you are made up of three concentric circles: The innermost circle represents your values, the middle circle your intentions, and the outermost circle represents your behaviors and actions. Integrity, which means holding true to your values in what you say and do, is present in you as a leader when there is an alignment of all three circles—Values + Intentions + Behaviors = Integrity. This takes constant work to keep the circles in alignment.

> VALUES + INTENTIONS + BEHAVIORS = INTEGRITY.

Let's take Kent as an example of a leader who works to keep his circles in alignment. Kent considers himself as someone with a high empathy rating who knows how to have sensitive and productive conversations with his teammates. He values empathy and intends to display that in his interactions. However, there are times he finds himself getting frustrated with others who aren't on the same page as him, which can

cause his behavior to outwardly show impatience. That's when he has to remind himself to go back to his inner circle, which contains his value of empathy. He reminds himself that everyone has a different Box of Life. He thinks of the box of Life . . . cereal. This helps him come back to building a bridge with the other person, rather than creating discord and disconnect. His empathy value guides his intentions and actions. Ultimately, this approach is more productive.

"I always have to remind myself not to have a NER—Negative Emotional Reaction," Kent said. "There's often a difference between what someone says or does and your interpretation. You always have to be very careful about that."

Ultimately, Kent sees leadership as a higher calling—more than just a title or a means to an end.

"Leadership," he said, "is an expression of the true self."

For him, leadership reveals true character over time.

Action Step: Model Your Good Values

We have talked about the importance of leaders seeing people as people, taking time to understand them, how to energize them positively, and how to lead them best. We have discussed the distinction between leading and doing and how leaders need to take a step back, trust others to do the work, and use their own technical expertise to guide and grow their teams. These are all ways to slow down to speed up.

We also believe it's important for leaders to ensure that their words and non-verbal actions match up. Are they saying they have an open-door policy, but their closed-off demeanor and harried actions communicate the opposite message? Do they claim to care about people but become noticeably frustrated when personal situations impact the ability to get work done? Your people will notice the disconnect. That's why leaders need to model their values and intentions.

When we work with leaders, we share a set of guiding principles of leadership that we ask them to keep in mind and to begin modeling in their actions. In fact, these principles are woven into the fabric of what we do and the process we use. These principles speak to the character of the leader. All three take patience and time to develop into habits. They are also three areas where it's easy to stumble into a misalignment of word and action if we're not careful.

Be Kind—Many leaders think that kindness will diminish their ability to be effective. However, kindness does not mean being a pushover or a doormat. Successful leaders understand being kind, pleasant, or affable to their employees will encourage and motivate them to be far more productive. It is also one of the least expensive, least time consuming, and simplest ways to make a positive impact as a leader.

Show Humility—Leaders who are humble do not believe they are the smartest or most talented people in the room. They do not live as if it's all about them or that they're perfect. Instead, they recognize, as a leader, they have both strengths and weaknesses. In fact, they not only have weaknesses but can also acknowledge mistakes and even own up to them. True humility also means putting others in the limelight rather than yourself, which is far more appealing than arrogance.

Show Tolerance—Remaining calm when things are not going well, remaining patient when people make mistakes, accepting that people are different, and having grace under pressure are hallmarks of a strong leader. Tolerance means accepting other people for who they are, including their strengths and weaknesses. People respond better when leaders are calm and don't become emotionally intolerant.

On the next page, consider these three principles as potential areas to model good values as a leader. Answer the questions related to how you can practice kindness, humility, and tolerance, then for the next three days, practice the actions you select for yourself in all of your interactions at work and home.

These principles will require you to slow down. You will need to think about them and remain mindful in order to practice them, but we're confident that they will help you be even more effective with others.

Model Your Good Values

1. What is one way you can practice kindness in your interactions and communication with others over the next three days?

2. What is one way you can practice humility in your interactions and communication over the next three days?

3. What is one way you can practice tolerance in your interactions and communication over the next three days?

Thank you for reading the first three chapters of
Live As A Leader

1. Visit www.livingasaleader.com/book to learn more or to order additional copies.

2. Want to discuss ideas to provide support for your leaders in 2023? Grab a slot on Aleta Norris' calendar **HERE**.

3. Take a look at our services at www.livingasaleader.com