The Leadership Journey

Practical Tips to Help You Develop Your Leadership Abilities To Their Fullest

"Truly a must have for anyone looking to develop and grow as a leader."
— Alan Page

Jim Holmes
FOREWORD BY ROBERT C. MARTIN

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Practical tips on starting or changing your leadership journey

Jim Holmes

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Dedication

On January 10th, 2017 my bright, empathetic, loving 12 year old son woke up, got out of bed, and murdered my wife of 23 years, Pam Wolosz. He then attacked our 16 year old daughter who was badly injured, but survived. My 83 year old mother in law lives with us and was home during the attack, but physically unharmed. I was on the other side of the continent at the time for work and dropped everything to rush back home to try and begin piecing life back together.

I've been humbled by the amazing support from family, friends, and the broad software community I've been part of for many years. The outpouring of love has been tremendous, and the contributions through the family's GoFundMe campaign[1] set up by friends have been humbling.

My wife had just begun final edits on this book, which I'd finally gotten to "draft complete" status after two years of love, sweat, and a lot of procrastination. The last e-mail I had from her was a list of feedback points for edits.

This book is dedicated to my wife Pam, and my daughter Lydia, two women who I've struggled with, laughed with, and greatly loved.

Lydia: You'll likely never read this, but I'm extraordinarily proud of you, your strength, and who you're growing in to. Even if I complain about you never picking up your room. I doubt you'll ever understand how much I love you.

Pam: I miss you terribly, but am grateful to have had such a wonderful life together. Thank you for everything you gave me.

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[1]https://www.gofundme.com/jimholmes

Pam during a hike in Italy's Südtirol region

> Now there's tears on the pillow
> Darling where we slept
> You took my heart when you left
> Without your sweet kiss my soul
> Is lost my friend
> Tell me how am I to carry on?
> — Bruce Springsteen, *City of Ruins*

One Final Thing

Put down this book right now and go tell your loved ones you care. Life is short, life is precious, life is tenuous. Don't leave important things unsaid.

I mean it. Why are you still here reading? Go tell them. Now.

Foreword

By Robert C. Martin (a.k.a. "Uncle Bob")

I remember going to a software conference in 1995. There was a group session on collaboration. The leader had us "make a thunderstorm".

If you've never made a thunderstorm, you've really missed a treat. Here's what you do. You start everybody gently rubbing their hands together. The sursuration sounds like a growing wind. Then you gradually transition everyone to start clapping very lightly. It sound like rain. Then you get them to stamp their feet. It sound like louder rain, and the beginnings of thunder.

The whole thing made me sick. I mean, what kind of nonsense was this? I was at a software conference, trying to focus on technology and code, and here's this guy doing a kindergarten exercise with us. It made my insides heave.

I hate self-help books, and self-actualization books, and self-realization books. I roll my eyes, I grimace, and I sigh. I mean, really, can't you just get a life?

When I saw Jim Holmes put sample covers of this book on Facebook, I felt that feeling again. Leadership? Really? (Sigh). But there was a version of the cover that I liked better than the others, so I let him know.

Then... He asked me to write the foreword.

Alarm bells started sounding in my brain. Me? Write a foreword for a self-help book on, of all topics, leadership? I was within seconds of sending a nice reply back declining. But something stopped me.

So I started reading. And my insides heaved.

It was worse than I had expected. He had *exercises*! How pathetic. A self-help book with, (ugh), exercises. I could just see all the mindless little snerds reading the book and following the exercises to make thunderstorms. Oh the humanity!

But, of course, since you are reading this you've likely realized that I changed my mind.

As I read through the book I started realizing that there was some pretty good advice in here. Advice like "Integrity is a coin you can't afford to spend", and "Work at a Sustainable Pace", and "Lead from the Front". This didn't sound like making thunderstorms. This sounded pragmatic.

So I read on.

I've been in leadership positions many times in my life. As I read, I started recognizing situations and scenarios. I recognized some of my mistakes, and some of my successes. I began to realize that the author must have had similar experiences. The more I read, the more familiar things became.

And then I read the appendix. I think you might want to start with that, because it's very revealing. It makes it clear that all the advice in this book came from some very real experiences.

So, in the end, I was sold. This is not a typical, mindless, self-help book. This is not "making a thunderstorm". This is a book that might just help you thread the needle through the fusillade of life's tests. This is a book that might just help you to help others thread that needle too.

And what about all those exercises? I can sum them up in a few words. Look yourself in the mirror and ask yourself who you want to be. Then write down what your reflection says. The exercises in this book just give you some topics to talk to your reflection about.

Preface: Why This Book?

Because too few people get good guidance on becoming a great leader.

What makes a bad leader? What makes a great leader? Do you care? Do you want to be one of the latter, and avoid the former?

The Bad

In June of 1916, the Allies of World War I were laying out an offensive, known as the Battle of the Somme, to push German troops out of an area in northern France. Preparations had taken a long time and a serious storm front moved into the area.

On July 1st the armies' commanders, miles behind the front lines, sent word for the attack to begin. Soldiers at the front had to cross a flooded river, then a swampy plain, followed by a mile of open terrain, and finally attack uphill into well-defended German positions.

Allied casualties were a staggering 60,000, with 20,000 dead, ***on the first day***. The commanders later visited the front lines and were stunned to see what they'd ordered their troops cross.

The command officers were so far removed from their troops they had no idea about the horrific tactical situation. Sixty thousand allied soldiers were injured or killed in one single day as a result.

The Good

In stark contrast, front line leaders, often non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and junior officers (lieutenants and captains) were able

to get their troops out of their relatively safe trenches and cross that flooded river, swampy plain, open field, and stagger up that hill to attack despite the Germans being in a well-prepared defensible position.

Whom Is This Book For?

This book's targeted for people running small to mid-sized teams of two to fewer than 100. In my history of leadership roles, I've worked in groups where I've known everyone on my teams, generally fairly well.

Certainly many things from this book can scale up to larger organizations—leadership fundamentals are the same at any level. It's some of the implementation and communication things that are harder to accomplish at that size.

Which Teams Does This Book Focus On?

I'd like to think this book can help you lead teams of any type. I don't try to specialize for sports, software development, or community volunteer groups—I'm laying out ideas and approaches fundamental to any team.

This book is colored by my journey. My life experience comes from leadership roles in the military, sports teams, software development teams, and an all-volunteer team who built a conference for software professionals from 230 to 2,200 attendees eight years later.

That background is the source for much of my thinking, many of my values, and most of my been-there-done-that stories.

My hope is you'll find this book helpful regardless of what kind of team you're involved with!

Leadership Is a Journey

You're likely not in a work environment resembling the Battle of the Somme. I use that example because of its amazing dichotomy: What makes the first group of leaders so bad? What makes the second group so great they are able to motivate their troops despite the horrific violence raining down on them?

I've long felt great leaders aren't born that way. They grow into their greatness and so can you.

Are you interested in moving into a leadership role in your career? Are you already there and looking to improve your leadership skills?

If so, I hope you'll find a few things in this book to help you along your path.

Acknowledgements

A couple thanks are due to two folks who gave me a platform for starting to speak about leadership.

Joe O'Brien invited me to speak at his eRubyCon conference some years ago in Columbus, Ohio, and gave me an hour slot to talk soft skills to an incredibly receptive group of thought-leaders. It was far outside my comfort zone, but Joe's audience was full of interested, engaged, supportive folks.

Joe's an amazing human who put himself through some extraordinarily hard years. I hope the community comes about to welcome him again at some point. He's earned a chance at some redemption. Plus I just flat-out miss him.

I'd like to give a special shout out to Michael Eaton. Mike gave me my first platform for speaking about leadership at the launch of his KalamazooX conference[2]. Mike and I are longtime friends who heckle each other mercilessly via Twitter. We've had bystanders ask us "Are you two friends or enemies? I can't tell." to which our response is usually "Yes." Mike's one of my closest friends and has been a great sounding board to vent to.

Mike: Thanks for getting me started with a platform to speak on something that's tremendously important to me. Thanks for the crucial support and feedback. Now back to the regular snark, jerk.

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[2]http://kalamazoox.org/

Contributors

The following folks have been kind enough to help out in one way or another via feedback as I've worked through this project. They've found gaps, grammar errors, and otherwise FUBAR situations I goofed on. Remaining FUBARs are my fault, not theirs!

- Stephen Cavaliere
- Lisa Crispin
- Nathan Sack
- Dave Shah
- Mike Washburn (A pal from high school centuries ago who reconnected while I was finishing this book. Wonderful small world!)

My Goals for You

Why do I want you to read this book? What do I hope you'll get from investing your time?

I hope I can help you with a few fundamental things.

Decide if You Do Indeed Want to Become a Leader

You don't have to become a leader. Seriously. It's a choice and you have options. You do need to understand the consequences of your choices—some organizations may not allow you to remain a "worker bee" in which case you'll need to find another job if you feel strongly about it. You can make a choice to avoid taking up that role. Make it a conscious, informed choice, though!

If you decide to start a leadership journey (and I hope you do!), this book will help you along that path.

Know How to Become a Leader

There are a lot of ways to become a leader. Some of it depends on the organization you work with, some of it depends on your current managers and leaders, some of it depends on you.

In some organizations, leadership responsibilities are handed out simply based on time in position or overall seniority. Other organizations look for people with potential and mentor them. Still other organizations encourage interested employees to step up to the plate.

I can't do much with the first (time in position), but I hope to help you in the second and third environments.

Help You Feel Like You're a Successful Leader

Part of a leader's job is to radiate confidence, especially when things are tough. Impostor syndrome, stress, politics, time pressure, all of these can make it hard to feel you're doing your job well, much less being *seen* as effective!

One of my goals is to ensure you're able to feel like you're a successful leader—even when things are tough. I'll help you figure out how to play off your strengths, mitigate (and improve!) your weaknesses, ensure you're meeting your organization's mission, and ensure you understand, as clearly as possible, the expectations your leaders have of you.

Help You Understand How to Run an Awesome Team

Finally, I want to make sure you've got a few tools to ensure your team's running as smoothly as possible. Believe me, there's little more satisfying than watching your team self-organize to solve difficult problems, crush their work with great success, and have a fun time doing it.

A number of factors helps you guide your teams to awesomeness: Clearly set expectations, work hard to achieve great communication, grow your people's skills, and above all foster absolute respect among every team member.

Working The Exercises

Throughout this book you'll find exercises designed to help you narrow in on what you want your own leadership style to be. I've worked to keep the exercises short but meaningful—and I've worked *really* hard to avoid them coming across as the annoying, cheesy things I've run across in far too many other books.

Each exercise has a timebox assigned to it.[3] The timeboxes are meant to help keep you focused on the task at hand, and they also helped me ensure the exercises stayed concise!

I'd encourage you to do the exercises by actually writing your work out on paper. Yes, it seems old-fashioned, but I believe you get better results when doing this type of work by hand.

In many of the exercises I ask you to take a short break, then come back and review your responses. This time away from the exercise is critical! Having a pause gives your brain some slack time to reset itself and gives you distance from your responses. Coming back to your work often results in some insights you may have missed if you hadn't stepped away for a bit.

> If you haven't read Tom DeMarco's *Slack*[a] I highly encourage you to. It's a crucial read to helping you nail down why overcommitting and 100% utilization are Really Bad Things.
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> [a]http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0932633617/ref=as_li_tl?ie= UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0932633617&linkCode= as2&tag=frazzleddadco-20&linkId=OLMC5LYXUTADA6FU

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[3]A timebox is a set amount of time for a task. You "box" the task by constraining your work to a specific period of time. This helps you avoid wandering off in to uneffective efforts.

Commit and invest the time to do the exercises in a meaningful fashion. You need some good, hard introspection as part of your evolution as a leader! I hope these exercises help you with that!

Why Should You Become a Leader?

Why should you become a leader? It's a valid question, and one you shouldn't take lightly.

Let's get this clear: most people don't *have* to accept leadership roles. Sure, some folks have leadership responsibilities thrust upon them, but the majority of people can exercise their free will in deciding whether to move into, or accept, a position of leadership.

Deciding *not* to accept a leadership role may have consequences. You may limit your career progression options. You may get labeled as someone unwilling to take on more responsibility. You may end up working under someone promoted over you due to your decision to not accept the leadership role.

Let's have a look at some reasons why you should consider taking a leadership role.

Too Few Good Ones

Face it: there are too few good leaders in the world.

Look around you. How many people in politics, society, business, or your community do you consider leaders?

The harsh fact is there are too few great leaders in our world. Startups fail for a myriad of reasons; however, poor leadership is right up there on the top three list. Communities fail to provide opportunities, economic and otherwise, for their citizens because leaders aren't able to accomplish what they should. Organizations, large and small alike, struggle to survive because their leaders aren't

able to get their teams focused on the goals most critical to the needs of those organizations.

Let's just politely agree to avoid diving into the abject failure of many politicians as leaders, shall we?

We need leaders to mentor and guide their teams in the workplace so their companies are strong, stable, and provide an empowering, encouraging workplace. Those leaders aren't needed just in the board rooms, they're needed on the front lines in manufacturing. They're needed on farms and ranches in rural communities. They're desperately needed in troubled schools in so many different places across our world.

We need leaders in our communities to help find solutions to problems plaguing us at every turn: poor education, lack of economic opportunities, crime, you name it. We need leaders to step up to help organizations targeting our youth: Scouts, YesWeCode, Dream Corps, and so many more.

Why should you become a leader? *Because there is a desperate need for great leaders at every level*!

Career Advancement

Moving into leadership can help you move forward in your career. You can open up many more opportunities for additional roles, responsibilities, and salary increases.

Sometimes we're hesitant to clearly state "I want to advance my career." It can be perceived by others as selfish or narcissistic, and peers may look down on you for wanting to move up the ladder.

Of course history is full of "ladder climbers" who've moved up for all the wrong reasons: they've gained promotions more for their mastery of politics than ability; they've outright sabotaged others' chances; etc.

Don't let yourself get derailed because of bad things others have done. There's nothing wrong with wanting to move along your career path if you honestly care about making a difference and you want to advance to continue at a job or with an organization you like or love.

Many organizations aren't set up to support the advancement of workers who would rather stay focused on technology. Some software companies have the notion of a technically-focused career path advancing developers to tech leads to architects and so forth; however, these organizations are few and far between. Most organizations expect workers to move up into spots where they're responsible for overseeing some form of integrated, multi-functional team unit.

Other organizations enable their workers to move into positions with more responsibility to help the organization to succeed. Furthermore, most organizations *need* workers to move up and help the organization grow its success. That upward migration opens new doors for opportunity.

Why should you become a leader? *Because you're opening up new opportunities for YOU to excel at!*

Filling a Gap

Organizations change. People move on, up, or away, leaving their work unfilled. The mission evolves, and new tasks need to be done. Sometimes external forces cause change (curse those customers/users/whomever!) which an organization may be slow to address.

Large gaps such as a new line of business, a new group/division, or a new product, are generally easy to detect. Smaller gaps like the need for a build/Continuous Integration server, changes to support processes, or a customer who needs more attention might not be noticed—or they may fall far down management's priority stack.

These gaps have to be filled or the organization won't be as successful as it could be. Maybe it's a gap that's close to home: something that's impacting you or your current team directly. You might have ideas on how to address that gap, but you can't do anything about it unless you take responsibility for getting it done.

Why should you become a leader? *Because you want to fill a gap to make the organization and/or yourself more successful.*

Self-Fulfillment

Despite many challenges in our world that give me pause, I remain entrenched in my belief that at our core we humans want to better ourselves and the lives of those around us. Self-actualization crowns Maslow's hierarchy of needs[4] for a good reason: people have an innate desire to reach their full potential at something that matters.

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[4]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs
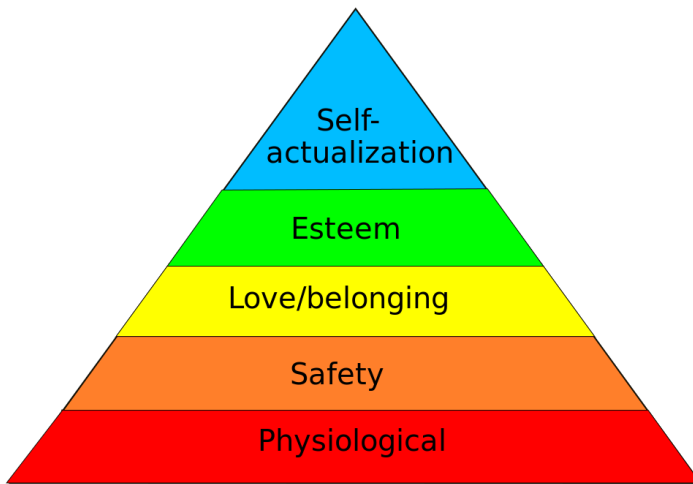
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In later years Maslow evolved his theories to add other goals outside oneself, such as altruism and spirituality.

You don't have to buy off on Maslow's ideas, but I contend we all have something inside us that wants to excel; we just need to figure out what we care to excel at, and we need to find or create an environment where we can excel. Working hard at something, overcoming the challenges along the way, and finally seeing success is a tremendously satisfying journey.

You don't need to shoot for the moon[5] all the time. Sure, a big challenge brings a huge sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, but smaller projects or opportunities themselves can be extremely rewarding.

Maybe you've a desire to help children get pointed in the right direction; Scouting is one place you can achieve that desire.

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[5] *Shoot for the moon* means setting goals that are risky, but with a high payoff for success. The USA's missions to the moon were extraordinarily risky endeavors. They were carefully planned, engineered, and rehearsed, but lives were still lost.

Perhaps your team at work is having trouble communicating among themselves; take initiative and start a daily standup meeting to help them better communicate.

Maybe your team at the local ice cream shop is having problems getting milk shake wastage under control.[6] Start a fun contest to see who can have the least wastage at the end of a shift.

Satisfaction from these efforts is cumulative over time. It builds up, and it builds momentum as well.

Why should you become a leader? *Because you want to improve yourself, and you want to feel pride in the achievements and successes you create.*

Exercise: *Why* Should You Become a Leader?

Goal

Help you focus on what your goals are. The *why* of something is a powerful context; focusing on what's driving you will help you clarify your goals.

Steps

1. Set a timebox[7] of two minutes.
2. Think hard about two things that are driving your interest in becoming a leader. Examine those reasons and make sure they are your top two.
3. Write down those reasons.

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[6] *Wastage* is the term for excess goods beyond what you give the customer, such as the leftovers in the shake machine after you've filled the customers' shake cups. Wastage of all types hits shops right in the pocketbook!

[7] A timebox is a set amount of time for a task. You "box" the task by constraining your work to a specific period of time. This helps you avoid wandering off in to uneffective efforts.

4. Stop your timer and take a short break.

Review

When you return from your break, re-evaluate the two reasons you wrote down. Are they clear enough? Do they still feel like your top two reasons? Do they align with the things you care about?

Edit, refactor, rewrite your two reasons as needed.

Takeaway

At this point you should feel like you've got two clear reasons fueling your motivation for moving into, or improving your ability at, a leadership role. If not, take some time to think things over. It's OK to have some doubt or uncertainty at this point, but try to rein that in and clarify things.

What Makes a Great Leader?

Take a moment and think about those you've felt were great leaders. It doesn't matter if it was a world leader or a teen-aged platoon leader in a Scout pack. Maybe it's someone who has taken a stand on some social issue you feel important, or maybe it's a fellow student in one of your classes.

People we view as great leaders hit something deep within us. Identifying those things that motivate us help guide our own personal leadership style.

Exercise: What Makes A Great Leader?

Goal

Help you identify things you align with about leaders you admire. This helps you define the things you want to focus on developing in yourself because these are things you admire in other leaders.

Steps

1. Set a timebox of two minutes.
2. Write down three people you've admired as leaders. Focus on those who stand out for *leadership* and leave out folks who might inspire you for other reasons. (Note: I emphasize leadership. Don't think of people who inspire you. That's awesome in itself, but we want the subtle distinction of being a leader versus being inspirational.)
3. Set a timebox of five minutes.

4. For each of the three leaders you wrote down, write down at least two things you feel make that person stand out as a leader.

Review

Look over the list of things you wrote down. Do you see any commonalities between those leaders? What things about those leaders inspire you the most? Which of those things would you aspire to develop or improve in your own leadership style?

Takeaways

We view people as great leaders because there's something about their style or behavior that we identify with. Getting a handle on what you admire or find effective in others can help you identify things to improve on in your own style.

A Good Leader...

Look over your responses. Do you see any similarities between the people you wrote down? Odds are those people had a number of similar properties that helped them be effective in their roles.

Here are some things I've always considered critical in those I looked to as leaders. This list isn't complete, and it's *my* list. Your list of leadership properties/aspects may be quite different. That's OK.

Holds Integrity Dear

"Integrity is a coin you can't afford to spend." I've used this line repeatedly in my *Leadership 101* talks.

Leaders must be forthright on everything. Big, dramatic lies are obviously a non-starter, but leaders also can't afford even small

disingenuous remarks. "We'll tell management this feature will take a week even though we know it will take two." That sort of behavior sets a horrible precedent for the team.

Worse yet, it's an attitude that goes viral and before long nobody inside or outside that team will trust any estimate the team or that "leader" passes along—and that lack of trust will expand out to everything that leader and team touch.

Leaders know that integrity is a coin that's built up over a long period. Big lies spend that out in a hurry. Small lies spend it out nearly as quickly, and they're much more insidious.

Guard your integrity fiercely. It's perhaps the most critical aspect of your own leadership.

Gives Respect, Earns it in Return

Of all the properties of a leader, respect is one I value the most. It's also one of the hardest values to come by, and perhaps the easiest to lose.

As much as some would like to think otherwise, respect can't be commanded. It can only be given to others or earned for yourself. All the other properties in this section feed up to respect in one way or another. Your behavior in all areas has a direct impact with the amount of respect you earn

Mentors Others

A good leader knows the importance of developing their team. It doesn't matter what kind of team it is; the team's long-term success is in serious jeopardy if those team members aren't continually improving. Good leaders lift up their teams' abilities, either through direct mentoring or by empowering *and expecting* their teams to build their skills up.

Solves Problems

Great leaders are problem solvers. They know different ways to get past troublesome challenges, and they're good enough to figure out new approaches when teams get stymied. Great leaders also know they can't become a crutch by trying to solve everyone's problems.

Leaders need to ensure teams are making solid effort at solving problems on their own before escalating up for help. Numerous variants of the "tell it to the bear" story are scattered around the Internet. Two I'll call out are at MadKing's Musings[8] and Rubber Duck Debugging on Wikipedia[9].

Is Decisive

Good leaders are decisive. I don't mean overbearing or that they ignore input from others. I mean they know when to bring discussion to a close and get the team moving forward. There's a difference between a leader creating a trusting, collaborative environment where teams have productive discussions and a frustrating, never-ending cycle of "well, what about…"

Ever hear the term "analysis paralysis?" It's a terrible pit to fall into, and it can be a hard one to get out of.

Good leaders help a team get the right level of discussion, but they know when to make the decision.

Knows the Mission

One of the reasons leaders can be decisive is they know the mission. "Knowing the mission" sounds like it fits only in the military realm; far from it. Every organization has some mission, some reason

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[8] http://madkingsmusings.blogspot.com/2010/10/tell-it-to-bear.html
[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubber_duck_debugging

they exist. The Literary Council exists to help people of all walks and ages learn to read. Lake Champlain Chocolates exists to make money by selling amazing candy to people. CodeMash conference exists to help people in the software domain build their skills up.

Every leader has a a clear picture of what the organization's top priorities are, regardless of what level in the organization their team is at. Sales leaders understand what their targets for new sales are, and how that ties to supporting the organization's overall revenue targets. Support leaders know what their customer satisfaction goals are, and how that ties to the company's branding and reputation targets.

Good leaders know how their team contributes to the organization's larger mission.

Motivates Those Around Them

Motivation is one of the (many!) tricky aspects of leadership. How do leaders motivate their teams to excel, even when things are awful? Great leaders are able to get their teams focused, fired up, and moving in the same direction—especially so when a project's gone off the rails.

Delegates Authority

Delegation is a hard, hard thing for many people to become adept at, much less master. Great leaders have learned delegation brings many benefits to themselves but especially their teams. Delegation frees leaders to focus on higher-level tasks, while at the same time building responsibility and experience in others.

Remains Calm in Storms

Good leaders know problems and emergencies arise from time to time. Those same leaders have learned to tamp down their own reactions and focus in on solving the problem. Good leaders understand their teams need to see them as leading the team through the problem, not contributing to an environment of fear, anger, or panic.

Protects the Team

I've always viewed my leadership role as "let me get great people, then get roadblocks out of their way so they can be awesome." Good leaders take care of their teams, and they've mastered the art of carefully deflecting things that bring down their teams' effectiveness.

There's a fine balance leaders have to walk here: teams and team members need to learn to handle roadblocks themselves. A good leader looks at their teams' maturity and knows what teams can and should deal with, but steps in to handle roadblocks or crises as appropriate.

Knows What's Really a Crisis

Few things in life, work or personal, are true crises requiring immediate action. Great leaders differentiate between issues that might require overtime or weekend work, and those which are important but don't rise to that level of escalation. Great leaders help bring down an organization's "drama level" so teams can keep focused on delivering value.

Leads from the Front

Great leaders understand there's a different view of reality on the manufacturing line versus their office in another building. Great leaders are closely involved with those doing the actual work because those leaders value understanding the environment on the front line.

What Will Make YOU a Great Leader?

Now that you've read the preceding section, take a few minutes and go back over the responses from this chapter's first exercise. Do you see anything you'd change? Anything you'd add or remove? Would you be so drastic as to remove one leader and replace them with someone else?

With that in mind, it's time for you to start focusing in on what you can bring to the table as a leader. We'll work through some exercises that will help you better understand your strengths and weaknesses—and how to best work with them in your role.

Exercise: Find Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Goal

Help you identify strengths and weaknesses you'll bring to the table as a leader. (We'll work on leveraging and mitigating in the next exercise.)

Steps

1. Timebox to two minutes.

2. Focusing on leadership-related aspects, write down what you feel are your two best strengths and two most critical weaknesses you see in yourself.
3. Take a short break and clear up your mind.

Review

When you return from the break, look back over your responses. Do you feel you've gotten the right strengths down? Are they your best strengths?

What about the weaknesses? We humans tend to spackle over our weaknesses and avoid pulling them out to examine them. Did you pull out reasonable, impactful weaknesses?

Update strengths and weaknesses as needed.

Takeaways

Leaders need to have a solid, confident grasp on their strengths and weaknesses. Knowing strengths means you can leverage them to help reach your goals. Being honest and identifying your weaknesses enables you to start fixing them or at least mitigating them.

Exercise: Working With Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Goal

This exercise will help you start thinking of ways to leverage your key strengths and identify ways to deal with your weaknesses.

Note this exercise is a *starting point* for you. Hopefully the rest of this book will inspire new thoughts about your strengths and weaknesses. You'll do these same two exercises at the end of the book and compare the two versions to see how your thinking has evolved.

Steps

1. Timebox to five minutes.
2. For each strength you listed above, write down how you might leverage it.
3. For each weakness, write down ways you might be able to resolve the weakness, or at least mitigate it.

Review

This one may seem hard. You're likely asking yourself "Why am I doing this now when the whole reason I'm reading this book is to help me figure this out?!?"

That's a good question! I'm having you do this early on to get you in the mindset of thinking about your own leadership style, and where you want to evolve it to. As the book title states, it's a journey, and this is a start.

Takeaways

At this point you've got a starting point in examining how you view yourself. Keep these exercises around as you move through the rest of the book. Refer back to them when you feel like, and perhaps take a few notes as you go.

Growing Into Leadership

As I mention elsewhere in this book, I believe few people are born to be leaders. I believe everyone has it in them to *become* a great leader. It's a matter of setting goals, working hard, becoming an extraordinary communicator, learning to love those around you (often a difficult task!), and adapting to inevitable failure.

In the previous chapter you spent time thinking about why you should become a leader. You laid out some leaders you admire, and you listed a few things you think those leaders bring to the table. At this point you should have a couple of your own strengths and weaknesses listed out, and some ideas on working with those in your leadership role.

This chapter is here to help you figure out steps you can take to start moving into a leadership role, or enhancing your effectiveness in the role you're currently in. We'll walk through a number of things you can consider to help move you in that direction.

Before we dive into those aspects, however, I'd like to focus on what is perhaps the biggest roadblock to many in their leadership journeys: Impostor Syndrome.

Dealing With Impostor Syndrome

Do you feel you shouldn't be leading teams because you're not good enough at aspects of the role you're filling? Worried that you're success is really a case of fraud, or thinly spackled-over failure? Afraid that others around you will figure out you're not the right person for the job because you're too inexperienced/unskilled/young/whatever?

Believe me, you're not alone in this fear. It's actually A Thing: Impostor Syndrome. It's such A Thing (note the intentional caps there) that Impostor Syndrome has its own extensive page on WikiPedia[10]. Depending on whose stats you look at, two out of five successful people consider themselves outright frauds, and up to 70 percent of everyone feels like an impostor at one point or another. [11]

Dealing with impostor syndrome, or other forms of self-doubt, will be critical to your success as a leader. Your team looks to you for guidance, and you can't be effective in that if you're immersed and drowning in constant second-guessing and hand wringing. Getting past all that can be done, but you'll need to do two things at a minimum:

1. Do some true, honest, difficult introspection on your strengths and weaknesses
2. Be disciplined and firm with yourself about stopping self-defeatism

Dealing with the second point involves you being willing to kick yourself (metaphorically) into getting over that self-doubt. Bob Newhart, a great American stand-up comedian, had a terrific skit on one of his shows that illustrates the basic premise: Stop It![12]

Addressing the first point above requires some introspection around the areas you feel block you from leading. The exercises below are meant to help you walk through this process, but you'll only benefit if you're willing to be open and honest with yourself.

As I emphasized in the section *Working the Exercises*, writing the exercises out by hand is very helpful. Writing out these following exercises is especially important. Getting your fears and concerns

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[10]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impostor_syndrome
[11]For more information see Wikipedia's entry on Impostor Syndrome
[12]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow0lr63y4Mw

on paper will help you work through what's unjust and what has some factual basis. [13] Once you've got the factual basis in view you can more easily address them.

Moreover, ensure you've got a good environment to do some serious introspection. Find yourself a place where you won't be disturbed, grab a drink, and take a breath or three.

> **Disclaimer**: I'm not a mental health professional. These exercises I'm walking you through are my own creation I've used to help others—**and myself**—to get through difficulties around impostor syndrome. If you feel crippled by fear around impostor syndrome I'd encourage you to search out mental health professionals for assistance. They can be a great help overcoming these sorts of things. Believe me, I know.

Exercise: Identifying Invalid and Valid Concerns About Your Leadership Abilities

Goal

This exercise is designed to help you identify valid concerns you may have about being a leader.

Steps

1. Set a timebox of two minutes.
2. Write out two or three concerns you have as to *why* you shouldn't become a leader.
3. Take a five minute break.
4. When you return from your break review the concerns you wrote down.

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[13] Writing therapy is a well-documented approach to relieving stress and trauma. If you're interested look up "writing therapy" or "journaling therapy" on your preferred search engine. Or the library.

5. Set a timebox of five minutes.
6. For each concern you wrote down, list at least one reason why the concern is accurate. List at least one reason why that concern is *not* accurate.
7. Take another short break.

Review

Review the concerns and reasons you wrote down. Adjust any as needed, including adding any new concerns you feel important to address.

Using the pros and cons you wrote down, validate the concerns you wrote down. Are they truly accurate? Are you exaggerating or overstating any? Are any of the concerns irrational?

Cross out any concerns you've concluded are invalid or irrational. Circle concerns you've concluded are factual or have some basis in reality.

Takeaways

At this point you've isolated your concerns to ones you feel accurate. Perhaps you were able to identify one or more concerns that you've been carrying around needlessly. If so, give yourself a big pat on the back. Hopefully you feel at least some weight taken off your shoulders.

Dealing With Your Concerns

Let's take a look at some mitigation strategies now that we're focused in on *valid* concerns.

Keep Track of Wins

Sometimes you lose sight of the great work you do. Keep track of wins, even smaller ones. Seeing patterns of wins or the occasional loss helps keep you grounded in reality. If that pattern turns south

(meaning less success and failure), then you've got an honest indicator calling out where work may be needed.

Write it Down!

Journaling has been long been shown to help people cope with various anxieties. The simple act of writing things down—physically, not just typing into a computer—can help you focus in on positive accomplishments.

Pass it On

Use your expertise/skills/knowledge and help others raise their own game. Mentoring is one of the most rewarding experiences you'll find in life. It's also a wonderful, practical boost for your own confidence. Helping someone become more effective at their craft helps you see your own strengths in a much different life.

Exercise: What Went Right This Week?

Goal

This exercise is designed to help you get in the habit of journaling your successes.

Steps

Prerequisite: Find a useful notebook you can keep around specifically for journaling. I love Moleskein notebooks; however, anything from a stone tablet to PostIt Notes will work. The stone tablets may be hard to fit in your work bag, though.

1. Set a timebox of five minutes.
2. Mentally review the day you've had today. Write down at least two things that went right, regardless of their magnitude. It doesn't matter if it was shipping a major release, pairing with another team member to solve a nasty bug, or simply getting a broken build fixed.

3. Take a five minute break.
4. Set a timebox of five minutes.
5. Review yesterday (or the day prior). Write down at least two things that went right from that day.
6. Take another short break.

Review

How hard was it for you to find successes for each day? Do you feel you had to go down to a trivial success (I brushed my teeth!), or were you able to recollect accomplishment you felt were significant?

Takeaways

Journaling helps get you a concrete list of your accomplishments. You can also use it to document tough situations, but do so **in a constructive way**: Use it as "Ugh. I failed at <something> but I'm going to make up for that by <something else>," **NOT** "Wow, today completely sucked and I was a total failure at everything I touched."

Set a goal for yourself to journal your accomplishments once a day for the next week. At the end of the week see how you feel about it and make adjustments. Carry on another week and see if it's a practice you might want to continue.

Other Reading

There's quite a bit of writing on Impostor Syndrome. Kirsten Weir's article *Feel like a fraud?* in the Nov., 2013[14] issue of the American Psychological Association's gradPSYCH magazine offers up some additional exercises; however, don't let your self stop there if you feel Impostor Syndrome is an issue for you. Search out other readings and support.

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[14]http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud.aspx

Get Your Boss Looped In

Your supervisor, boss, or manager should be your number one ally in your desire to move up. Your boss has your best interests at heart, and can help you find interesting opportunities to grow in to.

Hopefully you've got a great relationship with your boss. If not, take some time to quietly and seriously relflect on what you might do to bridge that gap. Handling a busted relationship with your boss is beyond the scope of this book—it's at least one or two books all on it's own!—but it's something you'll need to work through if you're serious about growing in your role at your current organization.

Managers have many different styles for working with their subordinates. Moreover, organizations have many different processes for how managers handle reviews, feedback, guidance, etc. What you need to do is take ownership of your own career and make sure your boss is in tune with what you want to do.

Do you have regular meetings with your boss? Do you discuss things like career paths, growth, and progression in your organization? Do you feel you and your boss are in alignment on your desires? If not, work through the following exercise to see what you can clear up.

Exercise: Charting an Initial Roadmap

Goal

This exercise is designed to help you and your boss lay out some ideas of opportunities you might take advantage of in your organization. A secondary goal is to ensure your boss knows you're going to be working on a number of concepts, including meeting with other staff in your organization!

Prerequisite

You should finish reading this section, Growing In To Leadership, before sitting down with your boss for this exercise. Having the background of the remainder of this chapter will help you think of topics for conversation.

Steps

1. Set a 30 minute one-on-one meeting with your boss. Make sure she knows it's to discuss your desire to grow your leadership skills/responsibilities. Your looking to express your thoughts and get her insights on potential routes.
2. Prepare for the meeting. Write down specific items you want to discuss with your boss. Add questions you'd like to address as well.
3. In the meeting, lay out your items and ask your questions. Make sure you're actively listening to what your boss communicates back to you.
4. Ensure your boss knows your plans to work through this section of the book. Discuss whether steps in this section are helpful in your organizational context. Get your boss's insight to practical applications of the ideas laid out in this section.
5. Come up with an action plan! Do **NOT** leave the meeting without at least two concrete steps for you to take!
6. Set the stage for a follow on meeting. You *want* your boss's insight as you continue working through exercises in this book—and other things you think up on your own!

Review

Take some quiet time after the meeting to reflect on its outcomes. Do you feel it was helpful? If not, what might you have changed to make it more helpful? Is it work re-engaging with your boss for a second attempt?

If it *was* helpful, then carry on and see how you do implementing some of the ideas!

Takeaways

Your biggest takeaway should be a clearer understanding of your relationship with your boss. Hopefully you'll be getting plenty of guidance and support as you continue your journey!

Secondly, you should have at least one or two concrete next-step action items to pursue. If not, consider meeting again with your boss to explicitly line those up!

Learn the Mission

Every organization, regardless of size or function, has some mission. A volleyball team lives for winning or at least having a good time on the court. Scout organizations exist to mould young kids into great humans and citizens. Food trucks exist to provide great food to people at accessible locations. Auto manufacturers exist to sell automobiles.

Learning your organization's mission ensures you'll know what to focus on as you move forward. Figuring out *what* mission to focus on can sometimes take some effort! Spend time on learning what the overall organization's bottom line is: increase profits, grow membership, broaden outreach and publicity exposure?

Now look at how you fit in to that: are you in a small enough organization that you can *directly* impact that? If so, great!

If not, how does your part of the organization roll up in to the larger goal? Not sure? Go find people who might know. Look to your supervisor/mentor. They should be closely involved with your leadership aspirations anyway!

Exercise: Dig into Your Mission

Goal

This exercise is designed to help you learn more about what your organization's mission is. The point of this is to learn *more*, not just go over things you already know. You're also going to work at spreading out your network in your organization by meeting with people you might not know.

Keep your supervisor in the loop as you're doing this particular exercise. Make sure they understand what you're looking to accomplish—they can be a great help broadening your awareness. They can also (likely) point you in the direction of others who can also help.

Note: The steps for this exercise are guidelines. It's tough for me to write an exercise that covers every reader's environment! That would range from enterprise IT organizations to small community volunteer organizations. Please spend some time thinking of the spirit of this exercise. Don't get hung up in the details: go learn something!

Steps

1. Find one person in your department's heirarchy who is tied in to the "business side" of things. Perhaps it's your supervisor. Maybe it's a sales manager, customer service representative, or marketing person. This person should be at your departmental level, not several levels up the chain. You're trying to find your team's immediate impact. Think of this like a bulls-eye target: you're looking for one ring out.
2. Set up a 30 meeting with that person.
3. When you set the schedule for the meeting, block out 30 minutes *after* the meeting for some post-meeting reflection.
4. Discuss how that person and their group fit in to your organization. Some questions to consider discussing:

- What's their history?
- Are they successful?
- Do they feel they're contributing to your organization's success?
- How does your team help their success?

5. Listen more than you talk. Take good notes.
6. Respect that person's time! Don't let the meeting go long unless they explicitly give you permission!

Hesitant about asking someone you may not know well (or at all) for a meeting? Set yourself up for success by creating a concise, targeted intro mail laying out the reason for the meeting and an agenda. That lets let recipient know you're serious and respectful of their time. Here's a sample you might use as a starting point:

> Sue,
>
> Would you have a 30 minute block of time open to meet with me this week? I'm in the process of expanding my knowledge of various groups inside Widgets-R-Us. My supervisor, Zeke Holmes, recommended I touch bases with you.
>
> As part of my learning effort, I'd like to understand more how your customer service group fits in with the business, our customers, and my own IT group.
>
> With that in mind, here's a proposed agenda:
>
> - Introductions
> - Where customer service fits in Widgets-R-Us
> - Your department's goals
> - How my IT group is helping you meet goals
> - Future plans for customer service
>
> Obviously I'd be happy if you have any suggestions or modifications!

I hope you're able to fit this in your schedule.

Regards,

Jim Holmes

Review

After the meeting, take some quiet time to reflect on the conversation and your notes. What did you learn? Was it productive? Do you have a better feel for what your organization's mission is?

Takeaways

These sorts of meetings might seem odd and uncomfortable at first. Stick with it! You're building your network of contacts within the organization, and better yet you're expanding your horizons of how you fit in that organization. That's all helpful results!

Demonstrate Ability

Opportunity doesn't knock. Opportunity doesn't even show up at your door. Opportunity passes by, and you need to go chase it down. (Usually I say "and you need to get your ass up off the couch and go chase it down," but that would be too crude for a book. Maybe.)

I'm a believer that hard work pays off. Of course there are unfair situations where good work is ignored, but I'm firmly optimistic that one way to get recognized as leadership material is by showing you have the aptitude and desire to make good things happen.

Opportunities for doing good work abound in every environment. Often those opportunities may not be obvious, nor may they seem glamorous. Still, taking on those small jobs builds up your skillset, and it also builds up your reputation as someone who gets things done.

Moreover, I'm a firm believer you don't have to ask permission to be awesome. Find something that needs addressing, take it on,

get it smoothed out. Now, to be clear, I'm not talking about going totally rogue and doing something like rewiring your data center's backbone. That would be something you *do* need to ask permission for...

Instead, look for things that might help your team work more effectively. Is your team struggling to see progress? What about posting a Big Visible Chart[15] to help the team visualize burndown progress? Is your team struggling with a bad environment and process? Offer to run a retrospective[16] and see what ideas might come out of it.

Exercise: Do Something Awesome!

Goal

This exercise is designed to help you identify something you can take action on without drama, politics, or having to go through burdensome processes to implement.

Steps

1. Set a timebox of five minutes.
2. Brainstorm and write down as many things you can think of that might improve your or your team's morale or productivity. Don't limit yourself—maybe it's something like a BVC. Perhaps it's bringing in bagels or suggesting a mid-morning stretch break. Maybe it's hosting a brown-bag lunch and learn to discuss the need for solidifying coding standards. (Tabs! Spaces! Both!)[17]

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[15]Big Visible Charts are information radiators of a very informal nature. They're meant to convey information to teams to help chart progress, status, etc. Read Ron Jeffries' great post on them for more information. Also: BVCs aren't just for software teams. Keep that in mind!

[16]https://www.mountaingoatsoftware.com/agile/scrum/sprint-retrospective

[17]An eternal argument, nay HOLY WAR, for folks writing software. Thought leaders debate merits of one side or the other. All Right-Thinking People agree using both is bad.

3. Take a five minute break.

4. Look back over the items you wrote down. Group similar things together into one broader topic. Cross out any unrealistic things. (Yes, yes, a team trip to the next SpaceX launch would be awesome; however, it's unlikely you can handle pulling that off by yourself. Or could you...)

5. Set a timebox of five minutes.

6. Pick one or two things you think you could resolve yourself within two weeks. Keep in mind you'll need to do this while still keeping up with your other work. You'll need to find time *on your schedule* to handle this.

Review

Do you feel you were able to identify a few things you could work on? Remember: you don't need to focus only on negative things. Sometimes spreading the word of positive things can be extraordinarily impactful!

Takeaways

Take the first thing on your list. Don't attempt to solve the entire list. Start with **ONE THING**. Go do it.

Following Up With Your Boss

Remember the section earlier in this chapter, *Get Your Boss Looped In* ? Hopefully you had a great session with your boss about your goals. Regular follow ups with your leadership are an important part of you developing your own leadership abilities.

Regular one on ones ("1:1s") are a great help in this aspect. 1:1s are an opportunity for bi-directional feedback. Make sure you're getting regular time with your boss for these meetings. Request regularly scheduled 1:1s with her if she's not working these in to your routine.

Becoming a Trusted Advisor

Trust is a critical aspect of leadership. You'll never succeed leading anyone anywhere if they don't trust you're taking them somewhere worth going.

"You've got a credibility problem with your client" is one of the worst things I've ever heard in my career. It was also one of the best things I've ever had told to me. I'd lost trust with that client because I kept over-committing in an effort to make a bad project better. Yes, you read that right. Yes, I've learned a number of lessons the very, very hard way.

It took me a long time to regain her trust. Thankfully my boss who gave me the bad news also guided and supported me in getting out of the hole I'd dug with that client. I never would have had the chance if my boss at the time wasn't an ardent believer in leaders serving as trusted advisors. Being a trusted advisor means you're willing to share hard truths in a way that will help, not insult or harm, the recipient. It also means you'll follow up on those truths to ensure the recipient grows from the experience.

I've found a number of books really helpful in this area. Some may seem a bit non-traditional, but they've worked for me.

- **Trusted Advisor**[18] This book's often seen as targeting consultants who need to build trust with their client. Yes, it's great for that, but the lessons it imparts apply to oh, so much more!
- **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team**[19] It's a story, but an illustrative one. Great lessons on how to bridge gaps with people on your team, and how to resolve situations with those who don't want a bridge.

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[18]http://amzn.to/1PN1yKN
[19]http://amzn.to/1PN0Ltb

- **Citizen Soldier**[20] and **D-Day**[21], both by Stephen Ambrose. You want examples of trust in the most stressful situations? Read about the soldiers of WWII as they come out of the US's Great Depression in to military life, then head off to fight in Africa, Italy, and Europe.

Finishing Up

Growing is the phase you need to work hard on your fundamentals. Start dealing with impostor syndrome—and good luck! I'm still working on mine at age 52!—look for opportunities to expand your responsibilities.

Most importantly, start learning how to deal with those pesky humans on your team and at your client sites. Leadership is about so, so many things, but at its core it's all pinned on understanding how to communicate to stupid, frustrating, wonderful, awesome, empathetic humans you work with.

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[20] http://amzn.to/1ZCkpbv
[21] http://amzn.to/1PN2EpG

Being A Great Leader

You've figured out a path, you've set yourself upon it, you've taken the opportunities that have come your way. Now you've been placed in some leadership position. It doesn't matter how big or how small. Maybe you've got one person under you; maybe it's 100.

Time to roll up those sleeves and make sure you succeed. More importantly, make sure *your team* succeeds.

Learn to Prioritize and Push Back (Gracefully)

How often do you get asked to do more than is possible? Monthly? Daily? Likely it's too often. Overtasking is awful on so many fronts.

First, overtasking has an emotional cost. Every person knows, somewhere deep in their core, there's no possible way they or their team are going to finish all the extra work piled up. That weight of things that can't be completed adds up. It drags you down and increases stress unecessarily. That weight and stress isn't just on your shoulders, it's on your team's as well!

Secondly, living in a state of constant overcommittal sets awful precedents for you, your team, and those outside your team. "Bob's team always takes on more work and gets it done. Even if they work overtime and weekends." That's a recipe for losing your team over time.

Finally, either the over-committed work isn't going to get done, or it's going to get done very badly. Studies abound about the impact of

poor quality work done during extended overtime stretches—both in thought and manual work domains.

Solving overtasking and poor prioritization requires you to take several different approaches.

Sustainable Pace

One of the best things to come out of software engineering processes is the Extreme Programming (XP) notion of "sustainable pace." That's the idea that humans working in thought domains such as software are most effective when they work 40 hard, disciplined, productive hours during the week, then go home to recharge.

> Working overtime sucks the spirit and motivation out of your team. When your team becomes tired and demoralized they will get less work done, not more, no matter how many hours are worked. [22]

Communicating Your Priorities

Use of a project board, Kanban chart, or any work item prioritization system will help you manage your commitments. A clear view of your priorities ensures you're able to clearly communicate expectations with your own leaders/customers.

Moreover, it helps you *better serve your customers*, as well. You're able to clearly and simply point out to them: "Here are the things you've told us are priorities for this iteration. We can't change this one work item since it's already in progress. We can, however, shift other things to accomodate your new request. Which of these other items would you like me to delay?"

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[22]From the Extreme Programming website's article on sustainable pace and overtime

This isn't snarky, it isn't rude, it isn't unprofessional. It's you educating your stakeholder/boss/customer that their choices have consequences. It's also you *serving them as best you can to meet their mission!*

Exercise: Establish Your Work Item Backlog

Goal

This exercise is designed to help you clearly lay out all your work priorities.

Steps

1. Set a timebox of five minutes.
2. Using a whiteboard or sheet of paper, write down all the various tasks you have "on your plate." Don't include each task in your defined projects' backlogs, but do list out all your tasks outside that such as meetings, reports, subordinate meetings (1:1s, etc.), and all other organizational tasks. This doesn't need to be a pretty picture; it's a brainstorming session.
3. Take a five minute break.
4. When you return from your break transfer each task to a single PostIt, 3x5 card or other small piece of paper.
5. Set a timebox of ten minutes.
6. Organize those cards in priority order, highest to lowest. Your highest priority tasks can't get grouped together. You need to make hard choices and rank-stack each of them. It's OK to group multiple items together at lower levels, however.
7. Take another short break.
8. When you return from that break write down on each card how long it takes you to finish that particular task.

Review

Step back and take a look at the entire list, carefully focusing in on how much time you're spending for each task or group of tasks at lower levels. How do you feel about the prioritization and time you're spending on those tasks?

Reorganize based on any insights you may have.

Takeaways

Consider putting your highest priority tasks, including their time durations, up on a board in your personal workspace. This will help you when you're considering additional tasking that's being asked of you. That list helps you negotiate and compromise your tasking with your superiors, team, and customers. It's much easier to handle this sort of potentially tough conversation when you've got your work clearly laid out in front of you.

Don't expect this to be a snap the first time you need to push back on getting overcommitted! Learning to gracefully and respectfully push back on overcommitment is a learned art. You can find good starting points in the following reading:

- **Slack**[23]
- **The Phoenix Project**[24]
- **The Minimalists: "I'm Not Busy, I'm Focused"**[25]

Learn More About The Mission

In *Growing In To Leadership* we talked about why you need to learn your organization's mission. You also worked through an

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[23]http://amzn.to/1UhgCwN

[24]http://amzn.to/1Oxbzv9

[25]http://www.theminimalists.com/busy/

exercise learning more about how your team helps your department to succeed.

Now it's time to step up a level and look at a somewhat bigger picture.

Exercise: Discovering More Stragetic Information

Goal

This exercise is designed to help you discover more about your organization's mission—this time at an even higher level than what you did in the *Dig into Your Mission* exercise in the *Growing In To Leadership* chapter. In that exercise you hooked up with someone in your department to better understand how your team fit in that organizational unit.

Now it's time to step up a level. You'll want to find a business person above your department. As with the previous exercise, I can't give you specifics; you'll need to look for someone who's at a organizational or corporate level—someone who's looking to the long-term growth and success of your business.

Your approach for this exercise is nearly identical to the *Dig into Your Mission*; however, you're looking for higher, more strategic insights in to how your team and department fit in to your company's success.

Steps

1. Find one person **above** your department's heirarchy who is tied in to the "business side" of things. You'll want someone who oversees several departments including your own.
2. Set up a 30 meeting with that person.
3. When you set the schedule for the meeting, block out 30 minutes *after* the meeting for some post-meeting reflection.

4. During the meeting discuss how that person and their group fit in to your organization. Some questions to consider:
   - How do they measure success at their level?
   - What is their long-term vision for their areas of responsibility?
   - How can your team and department work to help them achieve their success?
5. Listen more than you talk. Take good notes.
6. Respect that person's time! Don't let the meeting go long unless they explicitly give you permission!

Review

After the meeting, take some quiet time to reflect on the conversation and your notes. What did you learn? Was it productive? Do you have a better feel for how your team and department help your organization/company/corporation succeed?

Takeaways

This exercise isn't about specific action items. It's about building your understanding of your company's business as well as increasing your network of colleagues.

Foster Success

Good leaders understand they need to build up their teams' confidence. There are many ways to do this; my personal favorite is to get people in the habit of succeeding by starting with small tasks, then increasing responsibility. Over time this builds up a pattern of success for individuals and teams—they're *used* to succeeding and look for ways to solve problems versus focusing on the negative aspects.

It's also critical to ensure your people feel safe experimenting as they're learning.

Create an Environment Safe for Failure

Much of this starts with ensuring your people understand it's safe to fail. I don't mean advocating for failure, nor am I trivializing the cost of failure in critical situations: you can't be lackadaisical when large amounts of money or lives are at risk!

What I mean is that you need to encourage a culture of experimentation where people aren't crushed when a well-planned task or project doesn't come out as expected.

Smart Failure Versus Dumb Failure

Part of this comes through setting expectations around careful thinking. I've often framed this as "Smart" versus "Dumb" failures. Smart failures come when someone's made a solid attempt at planning something out, yet things go awry for unforseen reasons.

An example of smart failures might be a spike around trying a new object relation management tool. Your dev looked at technical and business values, came up with a solid idea around a prototype, but found some obscure technical issue that wouldn't have been discovered until actual code was written.

Dumb failures arise from jumping in to problems without any forethought whatsoever. I often use a very personal example for this.

Years ago I started digging out a rain garden [26] to capture runoff from a new additon we'd put on. I spent six hours in the Ohio summer working with a pickaxe and shovel to dig out a 8'x12' pit 18" deep. It was exhausting, hot, back-breaking work.

Hours after I started, I climbed out of the pit and realized I'd put a huge water pit less than two feet away from the foundation of the house. You may not understand much about construction; that's

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[26]Rain gardens catch runoff from impervious areas like roofs

OK. Just consider the highly negative aspect of having a huge pool of water inches away from your house. TL;DR version: it's bad.

I'd have avoided this mess if I'd taken time before starting to dig and planned things out better. I spent 11 years in the US military, and not once did was I punished by having to dig holes and fill them up. I waited until I was 46 year-old civilian to do that…

Create Small Victories, Celebrate Success

You want your team to feel successful. You want them to have the confidence and skills to attack complex, risky problem without the drama involved with a low-confidence, unskilled team. Getting your team to that point starts with getting them in a pattern of success.

It's important to challenge, but not overwhelm your teams. Get started on the path to success by helping them break larger tasks in to smaller ones. As often as possible look to create tasks that can be accomplished in one day, two at most. Avoid large tasks that take days or weeks to complete.

Breaking large jobs in to day-long tasks accomplishes several goals at once: first, bottlenecks and blocking issues get identified quickly.

1:1 Meetings: They're Not Optional

It amazes me how often I run in to people in leadership positions who don't have regular meetings with their team members. Regular, frequent one on one meetings with your members are one of the most important tools you have for a smooth running, effective team.

One on one meetings ensure you're clear about what your subordinates are working on. 1:1s help you understand what roadblocks need your attention. They help you see where your team members

might be heading off track. These conversations also give you an avenue for setting career goals with individuals—and follow progress on those.

Keep in mind that 1:1 meetings are *two-way* communication. Ensure you're open to your staff raising concerns and providing feedback to you.

Figuring out a good cadence for your 1:1s takes time, and it's very dependent on the environment and team you're leading. The number of direct reports also impacts cadence. Experienced, mature members might only need 30 minutes once every few weeks. Less experienced members early in their careers will likely benefit from weekly meetings.

Keeping 1:1s Effective

1:1 meetings aren't extended chit-chat sessions; they're not an opening for long-winded pontifications from you or your team. Set the expectation that these meetings are meant as focused discussions. Both you and your team members should come to the meeting prepared with a few ideas of things to discuss.

I generally use a format similar to this:

- Greetings
- Any critical issues to discuss?
- Follow up on previous action items/concerns
- New topics
- Touch-base on career-related concerns if appropriate
- Open discussion as needed
- Summarize/repate open action items
- Reminder of next meeting

30 minutes is normally plenty of time for these, especially once you get rolling. I'm usually able to shrink these to 15 minutes once I've gotten an effective relationship with my team members.

Keeping Communication Open

Ensure you don't close the door to your team coming to you with concerns when they need to. One-on-Ones aren't the only meetings you should ever have with your team. They're not a substitute for effective project meetings, or times when your team needs speific personnel discussions. 1:1s are focused around on-going projects, topics, action items, etc.

Formal Career Reviews

Lots has been said and written about the value of career reviews. Some folks think reviews are good, some think they're awful. Career reviews typically cause a tremendous amount of angst both in employees and supervisors. Badly done, reviews can be a minefield of unproductive, unclear fluff that do nothing to help the individual or organization.

That said, I'm a fan of formal career reviews with my teams, even though I'm regularly communicating with them via 1:1s. Regular career reviews carry a different tone and focus, especially if your organiation ties them to promotions or salary increases.

I use reviews as a focused retrospective for the individual. (My current employer, Pillar Technology, actually calls these sessions "Career Retrospectives!") Think of topics like "What's working well", "What needs improvement", and "What's confusing." I also like to include peer feedback, either in person or passed on.

There are a number of things I like to cover in reviews in addition to whatever's mandated (or not) by organizational policies:

- Recap the last review's major concerns, goals, and action items
- Major accomplishments in the last review period
- Direct, personal, and expert[27] feedback on areas of concern
- Clear, measurable goals for the employee in the upcoming period
- Employee feedback on how I am performing as a leader to them

Never, Ever a Surprise

Nothing in a career review should be a surprise to your subordinate, either positive or negative. If your team member is surprised or hears something unexpected in the review then you have failed in your job communicating to them.

Let me emphasize that: If an individual is surprised by feedback in a review then ***you have failed in your job as a leader***.

What I mean by "surprise" is significant topics, positive or negative, should be constantly communicated with your subordinates at the earliest possible moment. If your subordinates are under performing, or having emotional intelligence[28] issues then you should be addressing that in your regular 1:1s, or better yet immediately when you see the problem.

Likewise, praise for specific accomplishments should be passed out right when it's earned, not left for something months later.

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[27]"Direct, personal, and expert" is a mantra from my current employer, Pillar Technology. There's no water cooler griping, nor avoiding difficult discussions. You're expected to bring up difficult topics directly to concerned people at a personal, and you're expected to give thoughtful, *productive* feedback. Hard conversations aren't magically transformed to simple ones; however, everyone knows the feedback is meant to help.

[28]Emotional Intelligence is "the ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships." Bradberry, Travis; Jean Greaves (2009-06-13). Emotional Intelligence 2.0

The outcome from a career review should be an action plan for the individual to work on, as well as specific praises for accomplishments.

Work to ensure your team sees career reviews as a positive, helpful tool for guiding them in their professional development.

Working With Difficult People

There's no way around it. At some point as a leader you **will** have to deal with difficult situations. We humans are awesome pains in the neck (or lower), and you're going to have to work to handle situations that are far outside your comfort zone.

At one point or another in my career I've had to handle situations where folks on my team:

- had horrible hygiene issues that were effecting others, both in the team room and the broader customer site
- were suspended from primary duties while undergoing criminal investigation
- had substance abuse problems
- had chronic tardiness issues (The Air Force, it turns out, doesn't appreciate flight crew members who miss their flights…)
- had extreme emotional intelligence problems that were impacting the team and client
- were reacting badly to organizational or cultural changes

Welcome to Humanity 101, where we silly creatures carry every fear, misunderstanding, and slight from birth until our death. Sometimes it's hard for us to get over all the bad behaviors and keep sight that those same difficult people are actually (in most cases!) fine humans who may be acting poorly at the moment because of factors we have no exposure to.

When, not if, you find yourself having to deal with a difficult person in a difficult situation, it may help to keep a few things in mind:

- **In Private**, **Always**. Never, ever try to resolve problems with difficult people in public. Always do so in a quiet, private space. Trying to handle these issues in public merely escalates things as people get defensive.
- **Assume Good Intent**. Despite communication (especially e-mail!) coming across harshly, generally most humans intend well. Unless there is a history of bad blood, few over-the-top communications are meant to actually come across that way. Take a breath, and re-approach the communication. Re-read the mail. Ask the person to repeat their concern. This time, work *hard* to read that communication not as a personal attack on you, but as coming from someone who's passionate about whatever the concern is.
- **Ask Questions**. Do you *really* understand what they're trying to tell you? Ask questions—and make those *open ended* questions to draw the person out.[29]
- **Listen**. **No, Really**. Close your laptop. Make a point of logging out of your desktop and shutting off the monitor. Better still, take a pen and notebook, and hold the difficult conversation in a room away from any IT/AV gear.
- **Reflect for Understanding**. One of the best skills I've ever learned—EVER—is repeating a concern/issue back to the other person to ensure I understood what they're bringing up. This isn't a matter of simply regurgitating their statement back to them, it's you unpacking their concern and rephrasing in your own words: "OK, so what I've understood is that you're bothered the client is pushing off decisions on exception handling. By pushing this decision off, we're at risk

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[29]Open ended questions require more than a simple "Yes" or "No." Open ended questions drive the conversation to a deeper level by asking "Why?" or "How?" They draw the speaker in to a closer conversation by getting them talking more about the issue.

of the client's developers continuing to avoid building good habits that are going to be required as we move forward. Did I understand your concern correctly?"

- **What's In Their Mind?** You may be missing forces of stress at work on the difficult person. Years ago I had a client throw me out of her office. Figuratively, not literally. I was outraged, hurt, and about ninety-eleven emotions all at the same time. One of the best bosses I ever worked for gave me some great insight later that day: "You don't realize she literally staked her career on the success of this program—and we're struggling." Wow, talk about a **powerful** moment! I'd had no clue of the deep fears driving her. (And I should have.)

You *will* have to deal with difficult people at some point. As much as you'd like to, don't avoid those situations. Head them off as early as possible, and work hard to build some common understanding with those people.

Just as importantly, don't let yourself get run over by people who have no desire to change or compromise. "We'll have to agree to disagree" is an appropriate response in some situations.

Handling "Red Zone" Situations

At some point in your career, you will come across a situation where you're ready to explode—if you haven't already. Maybe it's an umerited attack on you personally. Maybe workplace politics have exploded around a project you're working on. Perhaps it's someone lashing out at your team.

Our human bodies react in rather amazing ways to stress, especially anger. Millenia of evolution have hardwired us to instinctual fight or flight reactions. Adrenalin and other chemicals flood your bloodstream. Your pulse spikes, your breathing accelerates, and your muscles tense.

Regardless of the cause, this is a dangerous place! You're about to lose control and blow your stack. Few people are able to think or react coherently in these situations, much less think or react in a way to control the outcome.

I can't emphasize this enough: you are in an extraordinarily dangerous place in these situations. Not only are you likely to **not** solve the problem, you may be at risk of permanently damaging your relationship with your colleagues or client. Worse yet you could completely torpedo your current career status.

How do you deal with these situations? Start with a hefty dose of self-awareness. Learn to understand what situations trigger you, and then plan on how you're going to handle them.

Exercise: Identify Your Dangerous Tripwires

Tripwires are lines stretched across an area to trigger an alarm or a mine. It's a useful term for what we're talking about: finding something to help alert you that danger's just ahead.

Clarifying your emotional tripwires is critical so you better understand when you're near a bad situation. Coming up with an action plan on how to remain calm when you can't avoid those situations is every bit as critical.

Goal

This exercise is designed to help you identify your tripwires. The next exercise will help you create an action plan to avoid danger zones.

Steps

1. Set a timebox of two minutes.
2. Write down some situations where you've lost your cool or otherwise reacted badly to a situation. Focus on the incidents

with your strongest reactions. These situations don't have to be limited to work; it's totally acceptible to list out situations you encountered parenting, while driving, or somewhere else.

3. Take a five minute break.

4. When you return from your break review the concerns you wrote down.

5. Set a timebox of ten minutes.

6. Pick your top three situations/hotspots.

7. For each of those hotspots, write down a thought or two on *why* you think that situation set you off. These "why" causes are the "tripwires" we're looking to isolate.

   - For example, a hotspot situation might have been "Responded very badly to a conference vendor's email demanding special treatment and blaming the conference vendor coordination staff for the vendor's issues." [30]

   - The "tripwire," or "why" factors might include "Vendor attacked and disrespected my hard working team member" or "I don't deal well with dishonest people who shift blame."

   - Work hard to generalize the tripwires. You're looking for the larger reason that caused your bad reaction, not the specific incident.

8. Take another short break.

Review

Re-read your list of tripwires. Are they targeted to the root causes and not the specific incident? If not, take some extra time and re-work them.

Takeaways

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[30] Any resemblance to actual situations which may or may not have taken place during my tenure as President of the Board of CodeMash are purely coincidental. Purely. Coincidental.

Now you've got a concrete list of specific things that are liable to set you off. Awareness of these specific situations lets you create an action plan to prevent or steer clear of dangerous territory.

In the next exercise you'll work on building action plans to detect your tripwires and avoid the dangerous areas beyond them.

> While looking for a good term to describe the danger zone, my sister introduced me to the Buddhist concept of *shenpa.* Shenpa translates to "attachment" or "fixation" and is tied to the *why* of how we react to emotional situations.
>
> Pema Chödrön's great article "How We Get Hooked and How We Get Unhooked[31]" is a great primer on this idea. I'd encourage you to have a read through and see if the idea resonates with you. It did with me!

Number One Action Plan: Step Away From The Keyboard

Let me give you one item for free: Step away from the keyboard. Literally and metaphorically.

The single best thing you can do to deescalate a dangerous emotional situation is to step away from it, gather your wits, and re-engage with as much poise as possible.

We live under the misperception that everthing requires an immediate response. No. No, they don't. Few situations require you to take action **RIGHT NOW**, especially if your head's not on straight.

Is a life literally, not figuratively, but *literally* at risk? Is your organization losing an extraordinary amount of revenue each minute of downtime?

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[31]http://www.lionsroar.com/how-we-get-hooked-shenpa-and-how-we-get-unhooked/

No? Step away. Is your organization at risk of suffering an incredible catastrophe if you take five minutes to determine a sensible action plan? Step away.

Disengaging

How to disengage differs depending on how the communication is occurring. If the communication is via email (or Twitter!) then close out that mail and take a break from your computer. Go find coffee, a donut, or take a walk outside.

Are you communicating in person with someone, either face-to-face or via the phone or a video conference? Take a deep breath and simply state "I need a short break. I need to clear my head." If you're really at risk of exploding, then just the first sentence might be enough.

Once I simply raised my hand, palm out to the person, and said "Enough!" as I walked out the door. I was so close to exploding I couldn't do anything more without shouting at the person. Me shouting is not a pretty situation. I don't have an indoor voice. I have an outdoor voice and a parade ground voice. My angry voice is several orders of magnitude louder than my parade ground voice.

Recovering

Do what it takes to get your head clear after you've disengaged, but do it in a speedy fashion. You don't want to let the situation fester; you need to quickly address and mitigate whatever the problem is.

Take some time as you're recovering to figure out what got you so close to exploding. Can you tie it back to a known trigger? Is it something new?

It's also critical to take some time to make sure you understand where the other person is coming from. Empathy for someone with strongly held opinions that are extremely different from yours isn't easy, but it's important if you're going to reach a solution.

> I'm writing this particular section on 12 Nov, 2016, days after
> the election of Donald Trump as the US President. The irony
> of writing this content as people on all sides are angry, scared,
> and otherwise highly emotional is not lost on me.

Re-Engaging

It's important that you quickly re-engage to resolve whatever the
issue was. As I said earlier, don't let things fester.

Get back with the people you had to disconnect from. Acknowl-
edgeIt's also critical to acknowledge the strength of the stress and
emotion that led to you disengaging. Just as important is thanking
the other person for giving you some space to recover and re-think
things.

"Thanks for giving me a couple minutes. We both feel very strongly
about this, and I really want to make sure my head is on straight
so we can figure out a solution that works for us both." That sort of
statement when you re-engage is a *huge* step forward.

Be Prepared

"Be Prepared." The Boy Scouts have it right with their motto.[32]

Handling potentially explosive situations is extraordinarily hard,
and it's harder to do off the cuff. "Emotional Hijacking"[33] is a real
thing, and you can train your brain's reaction to these situations.

This next exercise will help you set up scenarios to get you training
your brain to help avoiding these explosive situations.

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[32]The Boy Scout Motto is "Be Prepared."
[33]Emotional hijacking, or amygdala hijacking is the brain's physical/chemical reaction
to intense situations. Wikipedia has a good description of it.

Exercise: Create a Tripwire Action Plan

Now it's time to figure out how to head trouble off when you see you're getting close to one of your tripwires. You'll need your list of tripwires from the previous exercise.

You may find this exercise longer than the others. It's worth it, because you'll need to dig deep to make sure you're building up a solid, workable approach to deflating the dangerous situations.

Goal

This exercise is designed to help you build a set of reliable steps to take when you find yourself hitting a tripwire situation.

Steps

1. Set a timebox of five minutes. This is a fairly long timebox because I want you to dig deep in the next step.
2. Look at the situations you listed, and think about commonalities where you find yourself at risk for explosions: you're tired, someone is criticizing your team, dealing with certain customers or colleagues, etc. Write those down.
3. Take a five minute break.
4. When you return from your break review the concerns you wrote down.
5. Set a timebox of five minutes—another long box.
6. Think of ways you can eliminate or mitigate those concerns. Here are a few ideas for broad areas:
   - **Tense Meetings**

     – Ensure a clear agenda and goals/outcomes are known
     – Set behavior expetations at start of the meeting
     – Use a meeting facilitator, a neutral person if possible. The facilitator's role is to help everyone be heard while avoiding dominance.

- Take your list of tripwires in to the meeting and keep them close at hand. Keep yourself prepared!
  - Set concrete break times for longer meetings
- **Difficult People**
  - Focus on concrete goals, try to avoid ambiguity where possible
  - Consider a 1:1 meeting to try and set a productive framework for professional discussions
  - See if you can reach a simple "agree to disagree" accord
  - Failing that, prefer meeting with the person in a group where others may help mitigate bad behaviors
- **Generalized Overreactions**
  - Examine your basic needs: Hunger, exhaustion, overall stress
  - Use the work prioritization and work/life balance exercises elsewhere in this book to help reduce commitment levels
  - Use meditation, walks, or even gentle stretching on a regular basis
7. Take another short break.

Review

How do you feel about your ideas from step 6? Do you feel they're useful?

Consider reviewing some of the material on amygdala hijacking available through books such as *Emotional Intelligence* [34] or various articles posted on the Internet.

I've found the Harvard Business Review's post[35] well-written and helpful. Likewise, Ken Sande's article at Relational Wisdom 360[36] is

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[34] Emotional Intelligence 2.0
[35] https://hbr.org/2015/12/calming-your-brain-during-conflict
[36] https://rw360.org/2014/05/19/four-ways-defeat-hijacking/

another good one. It has a significant religous aspect to it; however, the content is well-worth reading even if that sort of thing bothers you.

Takeaways

Learning to deal with these situations is crucial. You need to be successful for yourself, and you also want to ensure you're modeling positive behaviors for your team—who will take note every time you pop your cork.

In addition to this, I'd highly, **highly** encourage you to read *Emotional Intelligence* for its extremely helpful discussions around these difficult topics.

Level Up Your Communication Skills

I purposely left communication for the last. I think it's perhaps the most important skill of all for any leader. Communication is the underpinning for every other aspect of leadership. Your best intentions are useless if you're unable to clearly lay out your vision and plans. You'll be even worse if you're unable to actively listen and understand what your partners in communication are trying to tell you.

Them, Not You

It took me years to finally understand this, but communication is about the people you're trying to communicate with. It's *not* about you. Effective communication is about figuring out your vision, and framing it so your intended audience is able to understand and get as fired up about the topic as you are.

Some years ago I gave a talk at the KalamazooX Conference titled *It's Not About You.* The talk's just over 30 minutes long, and you

may find it interesting. You can view it on the conference's site[37] if you're interested.

Learning how to effectively frame your communication is a craft. It takes time, it takes effort, and it takes studying basic human nature. In addition to endless writings on communications, several frameworks are available that can greatly help your effectiveness in how to relate to other people.

It's important to understand these frameworks are inexact and flex depending on a person's environment and situation. Each of these frameworks (my own label for them) has its detractors and criticisms. Regardless, they all provide great insight in to dealing with other humans.

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

Myers-Briggs Type Indicators (MBTI) derives from the personality traits described by psychologist Carl Jung. MBTI's purpose is to inventory and group those traits as a method of helping individuals understand how they perceive and react to the world around them.

MBTI has served as a evolutionary starting point for other approaches such as 16 Personalities[38] which apply their own distinctions.

Numerous free MBTI assessments can be found via Google—where "free" means "free for the price of your e-mail address so we can send you our newsletter."

DISC

DISC is a behavioral trait theory which came out of work by William Marston who, among other things, built the first functional

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[37] https://vimeo.com/68908830
[38] https://www.16personalities.com/

lie detector. Industrial psychologist Walter Clarke later created an assessment tool.

At its heart DISC is a tool for helping people better understand interpersonal relationships and improve communication with others. DISC is based on four traits:

- Dominance
- Influence
- Steadiness
- Compliance

Every person has a mix of these traits; understanding which trait is prevalent in situations can help understand how to best interact with that person when trying to effectively communicate with them. For example, persons high in the Dominant trait typically like concise, well-sumarized information that helps them make quick decisions. Highly compliant persons are the typical "data geek"— they want detailed spreadsheets so they can pore over the details.

I've found DISC to be one of the clearest frameworks for helping me to interact with clients, team members, and even family. It seriously changed how I approach communication and relationships.

As with Meyers-Briggs, you can find numerous online assessments for the price of your e-mail address.

O'Grady's Instigator vs. Empathizer

Dayton, Ohio, psychologist Dennis O'Grady breaks it down in to an even simpler format: You're either an Instigator or Empathizer. Instigators are those we see as blunt, driven, and strong-willed. Empathizers are those who are more emotion-based, look to longer discussions, etc.

Neither of these types are good or bad; they both have extraordinarily positive aspects. Both also have negatives. Learning to deal with them is critical.

I ran across Dr. O'Grady some years ago when living in Dayton. I found his simple system refreshing. He's got a great newsletter with helpful information you can subscribe to via his website: http://www.drogrady.com/.

Taking Care of You

Take a moment and think on this: We're trying to get our teams to lead lives that are calm, focused, productive, and highly rewarding. How can you lead others if your own life is a mess?

Taking care of yourself is critical, even in the most stressful of times. Think about airline preflight safety briefs. Flight attendents emphasize putting your own oxygen mask on before helping those around.

Same thing for leadership, folks!

Time Management

I've talked about time management at several points in this book. I can't emphasize how critical a skill it is for you to master! There are a great many different time management philosophies, frameworks, and toolsets.

In my opinion picking the right approach is less important than getting started with one and being disciplined about it—and adapting it to your own personal needs.

Over the years I've used a number of approaches. My own (current!) top three list includes bits and pieces of the following:

- Personal Kanban[39]
- Pomodoro Technique[40]
- Todoist[41]

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[39]http://www.personalkanban.com/pk/
[40]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique
[41]https://en.todoist.com/

Do any of these things—do something else. But by all means, *start doing something!*

Find a Mentor—For Yourself

I spend a significant amount of time mentoring others, both traditional subordinates from work as well as people I've run across in community activities. Mentoring is one of the most powerful, fulfilling things you can do.

It's also something you need to set up for your own growth!

Figure out areas you want to raise up your game in. Is it soft skills like emotional intelligence and facilitation? What about your work's technical domains?

Finding a mentor when you're further along in your career can be hard. (Ask me how I know…) Regardless, you need to make that effort!

Something that's worked for me over the last several years is having more than one mentor. I can't find that "one person" who can help me in all the areas I'm looking for help on.

Instead, I've formed relationships with a number of people who I look to for guidance in specific areas. I've got someone I confer with on testing-related issues. I have someone else I look to for wisdom and guidance on the strategic business domain. I've got a wonderful person I get help on my soft skills from.

Mentors are different than influencers and people you respect. The latter two categories are important, but a mentor is someone you need a specific sort of relationship with. You need to be *accountable* to your mentor.

The Final, Most Important Thing: Work Life Balance

Somewhere around 2013 I found myself drowning. Not literally, but figuratively drowning in my commitments. I was running a local software development user group, I was President of the Board of Directors for a conference drawing 2,500 attendees and hundreds of family members. I spoke at a large number of conferences, user groups, and meet ups. I was doing a significant amount of software and testing projects outside of my normal work. I was flying 140,000 miles per year to travel for my work, and spending at least 50-60 hours a week for that job. I was Cubmaster for my son's Cub Scout pack, and I had a few other things I was responsible for as well.

It may not be surprising, but I wasn't serving folks I was leading well, nor was I serving those in the communities I interacted with well. I was also poorly managing my type 1 diabetes.

Worst of all, I had a family I wasn't spending enough time with, especially a young daughter who badly needed her father to not be an angry, tired jackass all the time.

I managed to get a handle on things in time to head off any horrible explosions or epic failures, but just barely.

Take a step back and look at how satisfied you are with your entire life. Not just how well you're succeeding at work, but how you are doing *as a human.* Are you happy with your balance? If so, great. If not, work to figure out what's important and what's not. Get rid of the latter, prioritize the former.

Your teams will be happier with you, your loved ones will be happier with you, and best of all ***you'll*** be happier with you.

Finishing Up

Exercise: What Have You Learned About Yourself?

Goal

Identify what, if anything, you've altered in your view of your own leadership potential.

Steps

Repeat the "Find Your Strengths and Weaknesses" exercise from the chapter *What Makes a Great Leader?*

Review

Compare your results to what you did at the beginning of the book. Did your view of your own leadership strengths and weaknesses change?

It's OK if they didn't—perhaps you already had a solid grasp on your own center. That's a good thing!

If your results *did* change, take some time to unpack that. What changed? How did they change? Hopefully you feel they changed for the better!

Closing Up

This book has been a multi-year labor of love for me as I've struggled to write while balancing job changes, cross-country moves, emotional ups and downs, life with a teenager, 100,000 air miles of commuting a year, and any number of other significant life events.

Additionally, I had a major family trauma[42] hit right as I went in to the final editing phase. I lost not only my editor, but more importantly my dear wife. It took me five months to get back to work on this already long-overdue final edits.

If you're someone who got this book from LeanPub early on in its life, well, thank you very much for being so patient and forgiving with me.

For those of you new to the book, thank you as well.

I hope all of you have found this useful, and more importantly I hope you've found some things to change in your lives. The people around you in your communities and work environments desperately need good leaders. I hope you've found something useful here to help you on your own leadership journey.

Go be a great leader.

Better yet, go be an awesome human.

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[42]https://www.gofundme.com/jimholmes

Closing Thoughts

I'm a firm believer that while a few great leaders (Eisenhower, Welch, Reagan) are born to the role, the vast majority of successful leaders have grown or been mentored into their roles. Leadership is absolutely something that can be nurtured and learned, but only if the right environment is created to help current and future leaders develop their skills.

So what should you take away from the book?

If you're currently running organizations, companies, or teams of any size, take away a commitment to better yourself as a leader. Take a long, hard, honest look at yourself and figure out what you're doing right and what you're doing wrong. Take a look at how your organization's supporting your growth as a leader. Reach out to your own leaders and ask for help with your leadership development.

If you're not in a leadership position yet, then take away a commitment to think about how you can work to develop your leadership skills. You'll be called up at some point, so be ready to step in to a leadership gig when it arrives. How are your communication skills, particularly when you're trying to convince others of your position? Are you treating others with respect? Are you asking for more responsibility, and executing on that?

Regardless of where you're at in your career, I'd challenge you to help raise awareness of the many problems our organizations face in developing future leaders. Encourage your organization to create mentoring programs that are more than just a free lunch once a month. Encourage your management and leadership to get serious about coming up with plans to groom future leaders, because more likely than not they're dropping the ball in a bad way on that right now.

We need great leaders in every aspect of our lives. Accept the challenge, step up, and lead!

Need Help?

Do you or your organization need help with growing your leaders? Maybe I can help.

I've had a couple decades' experience working to make teams highly effective at what they do. Sure, I've had some failures. Anyone who says otherwise is selling snake oil. That said, I've led and worked with teams from three people in cubicle land to large teams distributed across continents and time zones.

I'd love to talk to you if you're looking to improve how you and your organization grow your leaders.

Please feel free to reach out to me at Jim@GuidepostSystems.com[43]. I may not be the right guy, but then again, I just might be.

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[43] mailto:jim@guidepostsystems.com

About The Cover

The wonderful image on the cover is from a photograph by my older brother, Dan Holmes. Brother Dan's been in love with photography for as long as I can remember. He inspired me to pick up a camera and spend the best years of my high school time in a dark room tinkering away with prints for the Woodland High School yearbook and newspaper.

Dan spent years working for a company producing seed for farmers. His travels took him around the globe, nearly always with a camera in hand. Dan put in his time with the "day job" but never lost sight of his true passion–which lead to his transition into full-time professional photography.

Brother Dan still travels the world with his camera in hand, but now it's often running workshops in Alaska, Death Valley, or Nepal.

If you're looking to find some amazing photographs of beautiful things, or searching for a mentor to help improve your own photography, then you could do a lot, lot worse than stopping by Dan Holmes Photography[44] and checking out his images and workshops. You can also find Dan on Twitter at @danholmesphoto.

Just don't trust him if he gives you chocolate bars. Ask him what that means if you ever run across him in person.

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[44]http://danholmesphoto.com

Appendix A: The Leadership 101 Blog Series

The book you've in your hand started off as the "Leadership 101" series[45] on my blog at FrazzledDad.com[46].

This book's content headed off in a number of different directions, but I wanted to include the original series because there are a lot of great things in it. I've also had a number of very kind, inspiring comments about the series, so I felt it was worthwhile including more or less verbatim. (That also means I didn't spend time going back for a full edit on these!)

My Take On Fundamentals

Leadership is near and dear to my heart. It's something that I've had a lot of exposure to in many contexts over my more-than-a-few years in the workforce. Leadership is critical for any size group, be it a team of three devs working on a small website project or a multi-national auto company.

This blog post, and the series following, is the result of some thoughts which have been bouncing around my head for several years. The series is my attempt to point out some fundamental topics central to good leadership, regardless of the size of team or environment. My posts will be in smaller scale things one can easily control: respect in your dealings with your team, protecting your team, communicating, etc. You'll need to look to folks like Jack Welch for the macro-scale leadership things like strategy and vision.

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[45]http://frazzleddad.blogspot.com/2009/01/leadership-101-my-take-on-fundamentals.html

[46]http://frazzleddad.com

Be clear, please: I do not claim to be some leadership expert or guru. I've been in a leadership role in a range of environments from intensely competitive volleyball teams to software development groups, but I have never lead larger groups, organizations, or companies. Regardless, some things are fundamental across all leadership positions, or at least I think so.

I have strong opinions on how leaders should and should not act, and I have some strong opinions on how many companies are utterly failing in training future leaders. This would be in addition to the utter failure we see with companies failing to ensure their corner office types are leaders with a positive impact instead of a negative one.

I think I've got some unique insight into these matters thanks to my 11 years in the Air Force. What a lot of folks outside the military don't see, don't understand, or flat out ignore is the serious investment the military makes in training soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen in leadership concepts from the very beginning of their careers. I can't speak to details of branches other than the USAF, but by the time I left the Air Force in 1993 I'd had three separate week-long leadership courses. Each of those courses covered a lot of ground not directly relating to leadership, but each of those courses spent a significant amount of time focusing on how to get your teams working smoothly and successfully. I can confidently say I've had more "leadership" training than a number of executives I've worked for, and the lessons I learned in those years have served me well.

I'd like to say that examples of behavior in this book are fictional and not based on any person living or deceased, but we'd all see that as a pile of hooey. Of course the examples, both positive and negative, are based on people I've worked with, around, or for. I'll avoid naming names in some cases, simply out of the desire to focus on behavior, not specific people.

I'd also love to hear feedback from my few readers on this – but

please, I'm working hard to avoid turning my writing into Dilbert-themed rants, so please keep that in mind with your feedback.

Don't Screw With My Crew

First and foremost, as a leader your #1 job is to protect your people. In the Army a platoon leader's job is to keep his people from getting killed while still accomplishing their mission. Your job as a leader is to protect your team from interference, petty BS, and personal politics so your team can focus on succeeding at their mission.

There is nothing that will get me more fired up than having someone mess with my team while we're heads down on a project. Your job as a leader, in the micro or macro context, is to run interference on people who are more focused on their ancillary priorities than helping the team succeed with their mission. Yes, time cards are important, but don't come break into my dev team's quiet productive time to harp about a half hour of mis-billed time. I'll do my job as a leader, grab you by your ear, and have you route that conversation through me at a less intrusive time. (Funny, how "your ear" can be mistyped as "you rear" which fits the context, too.)

This doesn't mean you throw out all things which aren't directly related to your team's goals. Yes, you have to eat your vegetables and fill out your timecard. Yes, those monthly department meetings are mandatory and really can be important. However, as a leader you need to ensure your team has the space they need to get their jobs done. It's your job to prioritize those less-than-essential tasks and schedule them in at sensible times.

As a leader from time to time it's also your job to jump in front of a bus or take a bullet for your team. I once had a couple team members goof on getting something done for a VIP. Said VIP had a huge ego and lousy people skills. Said VIP blew up at my crew, going off into

a profane, over-the-top rant on my guys. Unfortunately, I wasn't around when this happened, and it bothers me still to this day that I wasn't able to intercept that lunatic. I did have some words with him after the matter, but the crux was I'd missed my opportunity to have taken that flack, redirected it, and let my guys get on with their jobs.

Your running interference for your team's critical for several reasons. First off, your team can focus on accomplishing their primary goal. Secondly, your team's sense of self-worth grows because they're allowed to get the mission-critical tasks done and see Big Picture Progress. Finally, your stock with your team grows because they know you'll protect them when it's really needed.

Protect your team. That's your job.

(It should be noted that when discussing this topic with my colleagues I often use a phrase that's a little more in the vernacular, something like "Don't f**k with my homies.")

Want Respect? Give Respect.

Respect is a crucial thing in any relationship, whether it's personal or professional. Furthermore, it's like a currency that you can't afford to spend, ever. The respect your team has for you helps drive your team to do their utmost; lose that respect and it will take you an incredibly long time to earn it back. In some cases, you may not be able to recover lost respect.

By far the worst boss I ever worked for had utterly zero clue on how to treat his subordinates with respect. He'd curse at them, berate them, patronize them, and just be outright insulting to them – all the while micromanaging every aspect of work that was accomplished around him. I got large doses of his patronizing, insulting behavior, but somehow he understood to never cross the line of cursing at me.

I can be foul mouthed myself, but that's never directed at another person, and I won't stand for people cursing at me.

As a result, this boss was feared by some and in my case outright hated, but never respected. His workers did their jobs for him, but he never got the maximum out of his people because they were too browbeaten to show initiative (others, not me), or too pissed off to focus on broader goals (me!).

Ted Gracey, a British expatriate I met while living and working in Germany, spent a long number of years serving in the British armed forces. Ted was a wise fellow who once told me a great jem: "You get respect by giving respect."

How utterly true.

You can't force people to respect you; you've got to earn it. You earn respect through your integrity at what you do, and you earn respect fastest when you freely give respect away to others around you.

Respect your team by being honest with them, even when the news is bad. Respect your team by looking to them for answers to your business problems and goals. Respect your team by listening to their opinions, let them know you've heard the opinions, and share when you're not able to go with those opinions. Respect your team by giving them the freedom to accomplish a goal by their own means, even if that means is a different way than what you'd choose. It's what you get done, not how. (Unless we're talking single classes with 3,000 lines of hand-written code and a cyclomatic complexity of 500. In that case, the how does matter.)

Fear isn't respect. Respect isn't mandated. Fail to treat others with respect and you'll never get it yourself. Give respect out freely and it will come back to you in spades.

Calm in a Storm

Great leaders project calmness, even during crises. Your team doesn't benefit from you losing your cool when times are tough. They need the feeling that things are being handled, even in tough situations.

One day while working at Quick Solutions we got news that a client had funding for our project yanked by their venture capital board. As a result, a large team of 28 needed to get down to 14 in a matter of three days. The entire team on the client site knew the bad news, and they were understandably flustered.

Tim James, our sales manager, calmly and quietly told me and the other studio leads "It's 4:30 now. By 5:30 we'll have a plan for each of the folks, and by 6:30 you'll have called all of them to let them know what they're doing tomorrow and where they're going next week."

Tim's quiet, calm demeanor helped us quickly accomplish what we needed to: get coverage for all our folks, and get them quickly informed of the action plan. We met the deadlines, and we got our folks reassured that they'd still be valued members of our group.

Contrast that demeanor with your stereotypical Dilbert-style boss. Exploding in a fit, or getting wound up and emotional rarely solves problems. Furthermore, your team quickly picks up on the emotional explosion. Productivity plummets, rumors begin to fly, and your team's morale falls through the basement.

Take a hard look at how you react to crises. If you're an exploder, or someone who gets tightly wound, then you need to change that. If nothing else, force yourself to separate yourself away from your team for a few moments so you can settle down and get your head on straight. I've literally gone and sat in a stairwell for a couple minutes so I could collect my thoughts.

I can't emphasize this enough: You need to have the presence of

mind to get your act together. Even telling your team "Hey, this sucks. Give me a couple minutes to think. I'll be with you shortly." is a completely acceptable response. You're showing your team that you're actually in control of yourself instead of just exploding.

There's another critical aspect of Calm in a Storm: The ability to figure out what a real crisis is. My military background comes in to play here, combined with my time as a system administrator for a global computer reseller. Some of my career experience is working on sensor systems used to keep bad guys from killing good guys, and from maintaining systems for a company where downtime meant, literally, tens of thousands of dollars in lost revenue every minute the system was down.

If people aren't dying, if something's not on fire, or if your company is still able to do its job, then the problem you're experiencing is likely not a crisis. There may be a massive inconvenience, and the problem may be epic in scope, but you need to keep and force some perspective on the issue. Yes, you likely need to address the problem in a quick and focused fashion, but is it bad enough that you need to keep your team in overnight on a Friday evening?

Likely not.

Don't get me wrong: There are times when you do need that level of escalation to fix a problem, but as a leader you need to protect your team by calmly triaging issues and allocating resources in a sane fashion to fix them.

Calm reactions on your part as a leader are crucial to keeping your team from spiraling into a panic attack. Keep your head on straight, stay cool, fix the problem.

Calm in a storm. It's critical.

Communicate Bad News And Big Changes In Person

Twice I've worked for people who surprised me with personnel changes via PowerPoint slides shown on the wall at staff meetings. The first time I learned three people who worked for me now worked for our new practice manager. The second time I learned a former peer had been promoted to a position managing me and two other peers.

The first example was one of the final straws causing me to leave a badly led company that was sinking. The second example, while it happened to be a case of promoting the right guy to the right job, came as a slap in the face because the CEO of the company who decided on the change didn't have enough respect for me and my peers to let us know in private we'd be getting a new boss. The second example was even more galling because a peer and good friend had a demotion from "Manager" to "Lead" and found out about it on the same slide.

This year several friends of mine got notice a week before Christmas that their benefits were being substantially cut – a week after a company meeting had the CEO announcing the company's outlook was rosy. Said notice came over e-mail.

The same company laid off another friend via a phone call instead of face-to-face. My friend had been recognized as "Consultant of the Year" two years before and had been highly regarded at clients.

Bad news in companies happens. Big changes happen. Every reasonable employee understands that there are economic cycles, and sometimes hard choices have to be made. Every reasonable employee understands that reorganizations are a necessary part of making sure you've got the right people in the right slots to ensure the company's success.

If you even pretend to want to be a leader, then you're going to

have to make hard decisions at some point. You owe your team the respect of sharing those changes in person, not via e-mail or over the phone. Sometimes this can't scale: incredibly poor leadership at the auto companies and UAW is forcing nasty changes down the entire supply chain. CEOs from all the auto companies and the UAW union president can't hit up each and every worker in person.

Still, there are ways to ensure that big impact news is handed out in as respectful manner as possible. Such communications absolutely must be in person, regardless of the effort it costs you as a leader. Shy away from these tough conversations and you're in Fail Whale mode. Not only will you be losing respect (remember the thing about getting respect by giving respect?), you'll do immense damage to morale across the organization.

I can't stress that morale issue enough. Rumors fly rampant and quickly spiral out of control when bad news comes from a phone call or an e-mail. There's no face to the message, there's no context to it, there's no chance to ask questions. Get in front of the message, get in front of the audience, get in front of the recipient. Share the changes or bad news, and at least make an effort to answer a few questions.

Bitter pills are never easy to swallow, but giving that news in person is the only way to lead.

Foster Success with Small Victories

Confidence is a nebulous, sometimes fragile thing. (Confidence ain't arrogance or ego.) As a leader you need to build the confidence of your team with a regular parade of victories and successes, even if it's a parade of small victories. This is critically important in two different lines of leadership: team confidence and building the confidence of your future leaders.

Team confidence can often hinge on the perception of the team's

progress. If your team isn't seeing progress on the project, then frustration builds and morale suffers. One of the reasons I'm such a fan of Big Visible Charts in project workplaces is that the entire team can easily see how you've been doing in delivering velocity. You might feel beat down by a problem you're working on today, but a quick glance at the velocity chart and you can see that you've made some progress on the project this week. Sure, you may be behind projected velocity, but you're still knocking things off and you've still got some success to lay claim to.

Building the confidence of your future leaders is something that too often gets completely ignored. While there are many, many aspects to building your organization's future leaders, one of the simplest, most critical things you can do is start building the confidence of those people at an early point in their careers. Give them small tasks at which they can succeed, then be sure to note their successes. Don't ignore failures, and don't make the tasks or recognition patronizing, but do get them creating a pattern of wins. Increase the complexity and responsibility of those tasks, and continue to give appropriate praise where earned.

Success is habit-forming, and you're priming the pump for those future leaders by getting them a cadence of seeing success. Your future leaders will gain the confidence that they're able to make correct decisions and will be better positioned to accept more important tasks.

Small victories lead to big wins.

Build Broad Shoulders

Note: This really dovetails with "Foster Success with Small Victories", and might even be the same concept but spun differently. Regardless, I wanted to call it out separately.

I never thought twice about it at the time, but at the age of 20

I was a single point of failure for a radar system responsible for protecting a lot of human lives and critical targets in the Persian Gulf. I ran and maintained the radar and transponder systems in flight on E-3 radar surveillance planes, and during the 1980s I was part of aircrews monitoring the Iran/Iraq war. Occasionally planes or boats from one side or the other would go try to blow up things like oil tankers, ships, or ground targets in countries other than Iran or Iraq. Our radar planes monitored those bad guys and vectored in good guys to keep people and things from getting blown up.

If I didn't do my job right, the radar wouldn't be available to find the bad guys, things might explode, and good guys could die.

On a less dramatic but more cheerful note, during my non-flying times I was also responsible planning annual budgets for a fairly large set of computers, radios, and other equipment. I was responsible for several thousand dollars worth of equipment, and had to plan an annual budget between $50K and $100K. I needed to understand budgetary cycles, equipment phase out schedules, future requirements, and a lot of other fairly complex concepts.

Both of these things were part of my regular work day all right around the time I was first able to legally drink alcohol.

I had a lot of responsibility heaped on my shoulders at an early time in my career, and I never thought twice of it. There wasn't a big deal made of it, and I got solid guidance and help along the way. That said, at the end of the day, it was my name on the dotted line for equipment, and my hands on the equipment keeping the radar alive to keep the bad guys at bay.

Dealing with responsibilities is just like exercise: you need to build up your muscle to handle it and do it well. Help your team grow by giving them ownership of and responsibility for tasks. Furthermore, don't shy away from putting large amounts of responsibility on them. Do it in an escalating manner, and monitor things as you go to ensure you're putting the right level of responsibility on the right shoulders.

Finally, do this as early as possible in your subordinates' careers, because it dovetails right in with the concept of fostering success with small victories.

Learning to take on responsibilities for significant things is an important part of your team members' career growth. Help them build up the strength to shoulder those responsibilities.

Don't Sweat The Small Stuff (And It's NOT All Small Stuff)

My first Air Force assignment after basic training was technical training school at Keesler AFB in Biloxi/Gulfport, Mississippi. There I joined the Blue Knights Drum and Bugle Corps where I played a bad second horn. (No, I don't mean bad as in wicked good, I mean they were hard up for horns and took me despite my tremendous suckage.) Because we performed for the public, we Blue Knights spent a lot of time keeping our uniforms top-notch. I, as did the other Blue Knights, took immense pride in having a set of boots and shoes that were incredibly well-polished. I kept up this habit through months of other training until I was posted to my first "real" job with the 963rd Airborne Warning and Control Squadron at Tinker AFB in Oklahoma.

Just a couple weeks after I arrived in Oklahoma, the Soviet Union's air force shot down a Korean Air 747 over the seas north of Japan. Things in the world were pretty tense at that point, and we deployed a number of extra aircraft to Okinawa to fly overwatch for the salvage operations. I was on one of those deploying flight crews and was scrambling around to get everything ready. For some reason, instead of focusing on getting my training material and deployment gear gathered up I was fixated more on getting my two pairs of flight boots polished up to my usual high standards.

Master Sergeant George Bishop, one of the most utterly smart,

highly experienced, and very respected radar technicians we had, said in a very calm, quiet voice "Don't sweat the small stuff." Nothing more, nothing less. His calm voice snapped me out of my tizzy and reminded me that polishing my boots wasn't going to get me on the plane.

You as a leader need that same view: what's the really important stuff for getting your team's goal accomplished? What are the important things that will help not only your team, but your broader group succeed? Focus on those crucial things, and keep your team from getting lost in minutia which contributes only churn and hinders progress.

Is your team getting constantly interrupted for administrivia tasks? Jump in as the gatekeeper to block those disturbances. Do you find members of your team getting overly focused on small tasks tangential to delivery on your project? Take time during the day to help guide them back on track.

You've also got to have a good filter for deciding what's small stuff and what's not. Everything isn't small stuff. Sorry, but those time cards, while a complete pain in the keester, ensure your team members get paid. Furthermore, those same sucky timecards ensure your company is properly recording your billable hours so you're pulling in your appropriate revenue.

Don't sweat the small things, but keep in mind that it's not just small stuff because it irritates you.

Open That Door!

While at Quick Solutions, I had mentorship responsibilities for a number of folks. I was very fortunate that all my mentorees were in Quick's Solutions group. QSI Solutions folks are, in my honest opinion, the region's best and brightest conglomeration of bleeding edge devs. (Second, of course, to my homies at Telligent!) As a result,

the scope and number of problems I had with them were miniscule in comparison to other situations I've been in at previous jobs.

(For example, while in the Air Force I had to manage a subordinate who "accidentally" shot his friend who was having an affair with said subordinate's wife. Long story. Buy me a beer some time and I'll tell you more. But I digress.)

Almost all of the personnel issues at QSI are handled through Larry Schleeter, the Vice President for Professional Services. Larry oversees nearly all consultants at QSI, and all the recruiters report up to him, so he's an extremely busy guy. Twice I had situations where I needed to bounce my ideas off someone in a leadership position. Both times I walked into Larry's office and was able to get a significant chunk of his time to discuss my approach to the problems. Larry was freely giving of his time and experience, helping me to refine a couple aspects of how I was going to fix the problem.

Larry was always adamant about making time for any conversation his folks needed to have with him. Sometimes I'd need to hold off while he finished up a meeting, but I knew I'd get his time at some point fairly quickly. What's more impressive is that I wasn't even a direct report to Larry.

As a leader you absolutely must keep your door open to your team. They need to have a clear belief that you're going to make time to help them out with their problems. If you're closing your door, either metaphorically or physically, then you're crushing free and productive communication with your team. A closed door means you're blocking the ability to quickly hear about problems that are hindering your team's ability to function smoothly. More importantly, you're giving the impression your team's is somewhere far down your priority list. You'll not be getting crucial feedback to situations, and you'll be missing the chance to let your team bring up pressing issues–something that's crucial for keeping a happy, productive team.

Of course you have situations where you can't drop everything immediately for your team, and you do need to respect your own time and productivity. Set up a Do Not Disturb signal with your team and lay out some clear expectations for them, but ensure that you're tipping the balance to "Open Door" rather than "Closed in Most Cases Door."

Keeping your door open reaps you a wealth of goodness with your team. Ensure you're giving your team priority for their communication needs.

Open up that door!

Integrity is a Coin You Can't Afford to Spend

Two of the worst leadership failures I've seen both involved me as the recipient of dishonest, duplicitous actions by leaders while I was in the Air Force. (Bear with me: there are some military positions, ranks, and terms in this post...)

Six months into my first stint in the Air Force I got in some trouble because I didn't take responsibility in the first leadership role I'd been entrusted with. Buy me a beer sometime and I'll tell you the whole story.

My First Sergeant [1] repeatedly ensured me he was supporting a verbal reprimand for me, not something more serious. After the dust had settled I looked over the paperwork for the mess and found, in extremely light, tiny handwriting, the First Sergeant's recommendations to my Commanding Officer (CO): a much more severe punishment which would have resulted in a loss of rank and fines.

18 years old, six months into my first stint in the service, and this two-faced, lying SOB is what I'm being shown as an example of a

leader? I still have a copy of that paperwork around somewhere. It's been 26 years, and I still get pissed every time I run across that.

Years later I had an extremely tense situation involving one of my subordinates. Our Chief Enlisted Advisor (CEA [2]) gave me verbal orders which I vehemently disagreed with because they put me in a completely untenable position. I repeated the CEA's orders to ensure I understood things correctly, then respectfully let him know my objections. "Carry on" or something similar was the response. I left that man's office, went and got my superior officer, explained the situation, then returned to the CEA's office with my Major in tow.

"I never said anything like that" was the CEA's response when confronted with the situation. An outright lie to my face, and he knew it because I remember him being unable to look me in the eye. I served with that CEA in that unit for several more years, then again in another unit later on in my career. I also ran in to him several times after I left the service. Not once after that initial incident did I ever give him anything more than the bare minimum of courtesy required by regulation. He didn't deserve it, and he never even remotely attempted to earn back my trust. Fail Whale, to use the vernacular.

Integrity is absolutely critical to who you are as a person. Not a developer, not a professional, not a leader, but as a person. Small transgressions with your friends, peers, customers, or team members will dig you into a big hole. Moderate transgressions leave you at the bottom of a huge crater. Large transgressions are the equivalent of the Grand Canyon, and you'll likely never, ever recover.

In the past I've dug some holes through sheer stupidity or lack of courage, and it took me a lot of hard work to recover. That time and pain of that recovery effort is something I can look back on now and say "Jackass! You could have avoided all that if you'd had the stones to do the right thing." Thankfully Darwinism gave me a pass

and I've survived after learning some hard lessons.

I can't emphasize this enough: Integrity is the foundation of nearly everything I've written about so far: communication, respect, responsibility. All my examples were negative ones because I wanted to show the impact of getting it wrong. Take the magnitude of those examples' failures, flip them over, and hopefully you'll understand the upside of being adamant about protecting your integrity.

You earn your integrity very slowly over a long period of time by demonstrating your honesty and trustworthiness. You spend it quickly with white lies, hypocrisy, and uneven handedness in how you treat those around you. Big lies drain your entire account in an instant.

Integrity's a coin you need to hold near and dear to your heart. You can't ever, EVER afford to spend it.

[1] First Sergeant: a senior enlisted person responsible for conduct and performance of all enlisted personnel in a unit.

[2] Chief Enlisted Advisor: somewhat like a First Sergeant, but generally responsible for a smaller group of enlisted personnel in a unit.

Stop Talking and Listen

This one might be subtitled "Miscommunication? It's Your Fault, Not Theirs." That or "Make Your Default Answer 'Yes', not 'No'."

Let's take as a given that your team is comprised of average or better folks. If not, then you've got other issues you need to address that are outside the scope of this series. With that ground rule in mind, if you've hired good people, then pay attention to what they're saying. If someone on your team brings up a point, they're raising it for a reason, and furthermore, since you've invested in getting solid folks, they're likely bringing up for a reason that will benefit the team.

If one of your team members is talking to you, take the time to listen to what they're trying to tell you. If you're not understanding what they're saying, then you need to work harder–as a leader, it's your fault if your team can't get something across to you.

Read that again, because it's important. Communication problems between you and your team are your fault. There are two aspects of this, both on your shoulders: First, you haven't invested enough time with your team to learn their communication style, or to educate them on how to better communicate. Secondly, you're not working hard enough to hear what they're trying to tell you.

As an example, a friend of mine repeatedly ran into roadblocks when trying to pitch crucial upgrades and changes to his company's infrastructure. The changes were utterly necessary to remove road-blocks hindering a large group of really talented folks who were constantly delivering value to the organization. My friend didn't have the best communication talents and sometimes delivered his requests in a blunt, unclear fashion, but what he was trying to say was critical to the success of the organization. The organization's head, instead of making the effort to clear up the communication issues, repeatedly fell back to a default answer of "No." The boss's failures to expend the effort to work through the communication blockages resulted in all the requests getting turned down. This ended up causing more blockages and slowdowns with his group–something you really don't want when you've spent time and money to hire top-notch talent. Furthermore, my friend got extremely frustrated and took a pretty good morale hit since he couldn't get any traction in trying to solve problems.

Your team needs to believe that you're an advocate of theirs. Your team needs to believe that if they raise issues to you, you'll invest the time to understand their problems, and that includes spending time to break through communication barriers with them.

Your team shouldn't expect that they'll get their every wish, but this falls back on your shoulders too. If you've worked to clearly

understand the team's requests, then you'll be able to clearly communicate back to them the reasons why you may not be able to move forward with their request. Your team will have seen that you've take the time to hear them out and have put some conscious thought into your decision.

You have good people. Invest the time to make sure you understand what they're trying to tell you.

Odds and Ends Grab Bag

My second-to-last post in this series is really a grab bag of several topics which I thought important but was too lazy to come up with enough material on to write longer individual posts on. Frankly, I was also getting concerned I'd started spending too much time telling Jim-as-an-old-fart war stories or was drifting into Dilbert land complaining about bad bosses…

With that in mind, here are a few smaller items about leadership fundamentals which you need to keep in mind as well.

You're Part of the Team, but You're Not IN the Team

A leader needs to be close to and part of his team, but he needs to remember that he's not IN the team. That sounds strange, so let me try to clear it up a bit. While you lead the team, you need to keep in mind that your teammates aren't your peers. You're responsible for leading them, you're responsible for their success as individuals, but you're also responsible for the team's success and contribution to the larger organization. At some point you'll have to make some difficult decisions, and sometimes an overly intimate relationship with your team can get in the way.

Don't get me wrong: build camaraderie with your team. Build strong bonds with your team. Build incredibly strong trust and communication with your team. But you've got to maintain a bit of distance between you and your team to ensure you're able to have a clear head when it's time to make tough calls.

Part of this is also taking care to avoid blowing off steam around your team. Don't vent your frustrations to your team, instead find a peer at your same level and form a Mutual Rant League. When you start venting to your team you're injecting them with the same level of frustration you've got. Worse, actually, since it's a one-to-many relationship and whatever you feel frustrated about will get vastly magnified and distorted when you vent to your team. Finally, they're seeing that you're not living up to the Calm in a Storm tenet I wrote about earlier.

As Capt. John Miller said in Saving Private Ryan, "Gripes go up, not down. Always up. You gripe to me, I gripe to my superior officer, so on, so on, and so on. I don't gripe to you. I don't gripe in front of you."

Unfair? Maybe. Deal with it. You're a leader. Act like one.

Value Your Elites, but Keep Membership to That Group Open

Hopefully you've got a team built up of top-notch performers. They're elites who work hard, work well, and work to continually improve themselves. The 10X productivity factor of your elites isn't a myth, it's a reality, and it's a reality that brings your organization incredible success.

Recognize those folks as elites, because they are. They've invested a tremendous amount of time, passion, and sweat equity in improving themselves. There's a vast ocean of individuals in the world who care not a whit for self-improvement, and your elites are small

islands in that sea of dross. Recognize your elites for what they've done to reach their level, and heed their input. If you're lucky you've got a team working for you that's a whole lot smarter than you, so listen to them! (And it's a Good Thing to have folks smarter than you on your team.)

At the same time, keep the entrance door open to that group and encourage people from other teams to aspire to get into your team. Don't you dare drop the bar for entrance to your elite team, but make it clear to others that they can join the Kool Kidz if they have the right mindset and put in the level of work required to lift themselves over that bar.

Furthermore, open up that door even wider: actively encourage members from other teams to join your brown bag lunch presentations. Set up developer exchanges where outsiders can join your group and get fired up about how neat it is to learn new things and succeed at them.

Your elites are the drivers of success in your organization. Recognize them as such.

Praise in Public, Criticize in Private

Do I really have to write about this one? Yes, unfortunately, I do.

Criticism to one of your team members should never be given in front of others. Do it in private where there's no sense of confrontation and egos can stay a bit less inflated. Furthermore, you're bettering your odds of success for ensuring the criticism is taken as guidance for the receiver to improve on something. Criticism in public is nothing more than a slapdown, and it's always going to leave hard feelings.

Even worse, your team's going to take a significant morale hit as they see you grinding someone down in front of them. They'll lose

the confidence you've worked to build up in them for fear of being castigated in public for errors, right or wrong.

Conversely, offer up your praises in public. Recognize the person in front of their peers. You're lifting up the recipient, and you're building good morale with the peers, too.

Successful Team? It's the Team's Success, Not Yours.

Just because you're a leader doesn't mean you get to take credit for your team's accomplishments. Sure, you've worked hard to build up that team, but the victories and accomplishments the team achieves are the team's! Yes, you certainly had a part in it, but guess what? Who did the real work? You guided, you had some vision, hopefully you inspired and supported–but you didn't figure out that Excel Services issue, you didn't handle all the blocking at the net, and you alone didn't pull off making 550 folks outrageously happy over a three day conference. (SharePoint development, volleyball, and CodeMash, respectively. J)

Sports teams are great for this: the coaches generally make sure the players get the limelight. Apple's nearly the complete opposite: Steve Jobs seems to take credit for every accomplishment and gets his name on many of the patents awarded to Apple when I doubt he's the driving force behind many of them.

Ensure the spotlight's on those who actually do the work. You lead, but your team wins the victories.