

# The Best Leader in the World: *It Could Be You*

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# We've Stopped Developing Leaders

The faster the world moves, the more disasters happen everywhere, the more we put our heads down to just keep our organizations functioning. We've gotten really good at tasks. We're masters with spreadsheets and data analysis. Our teammates know how to nail the mechanics of what they do. What about the ability to collaborate? Will they take the risk of saying what they really think to those with more power? Can they lead? We're growing technical savants, and we've failed to unleash their leadership talent.

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what you need to do is straightforward.*

We know we need a new generation of leaders. We know we need the best ideas of all the people on our team. In fact, we need a team of leaders, where we trust everyone we work with to be as committed and capable as we are. But we're so busy answering emails and calling into meetings from the road that we never reflect upon and then practice the behaviors of great leadership. We don't practice, and we never help our teammates become better leaders either.

Whether you have a formal leadership title or not, chances are you're reading this because you're a natural leader. You're the kind of person who steps up and steps in when others need you most. Or, you want to. As daunting as leadership can be, what you need to do is straightforward. We're about to teach you a model that will make you the kind of leader whose team people beg to join; and the kind of person who develops other leaders as a natural part of your every day work and life.

# Why Do You Lead?

Becoming the kind of leader people love to work with and then developing a team of leaders begins with you knowing why you lead.

Some people lead for the rewards, others because they see a problem that needs fixing that no one is doing anything about it and they feel compelled to act on. Some people lead because they love the challenge of gathering and organizing people. Many of us were taught that being a leader is the highest height of a career and a human life. There is no wrong answer to why you lead, but the best leaders in the world know why they will endure real suffering to struggle to reach for noble goals.

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Your answer simply has to be so true, so deep, that it will buoy you during the dark days and sometimes years and decades when things go painfully wrong. Don't let anyone ever tell you different; leadership hurts. Leading may be the most difficult thing you ever do.

The examples of leadership's challenge are everywhere. You run a company, a division, or a team, and there's always more to do. You're a principal or a teacher and the kids keep hanging on your doorknob needing more of you. You're a politician and you can't even begin to keep

everyone happy. Your community needs you, and there is no leadership role where the work is ever finished. It hurts to be the one who has to make sure the ship doesn't sink. It's a pain to be the principal in the sandbox as all the children make a mess of what you know is possible. There is nothing more important for leaders than to take responsibility and there is nothing more arduous. *The loneliness of the leader is real.* The sleepless nights and anxious days are an unavoidable part of truly caring deeply about what happens next.

If you know why you lead, however, you can immediately switch your focus from the pain and drama to the core motivation that moves you to take risks and do the difficult work. Marcus Aerialius, Emperor of Rome, led to find the good in each person. A philosopher, unprepared to deal with the military needs of the empire, he chose to ascend with his brother Lucius. Because the Emperor of Rome knew why he led, he was able to build a team of leaders in the most powerful position in the world at the time. Leadership is excruciatingly difficult, but none of us needs to lead alone. If an Emperor can build a team of leaders, so can we.

# Are You a Leader People Beg to Work With?

Once you know why, the best leader in the world commits.

A commitment is a promise and a pledge that binds us to what we're trying to achieve. In leadership, a commitment is a declaration about what we'll pour all our energy into making happen, and in some circumstances, even give our lives for. Wait... did we just write "give our lives for?" When you look at the impact of what stress and long hours do to us, it's what we do every day. We're giving our precious energy to something; your energy is your life. Where you're spending your time and energy each day is what you're giving your life to, and we don't want you to waste a moment. But what great leaders commit to may not be what you expect.

It's not the cause that keeps people wanting to work with a leader. Those devices buzzing in our pockets connect us to a world of distraction and need. At work, in politics, with our volunteer time, we will quickly bounce from even the most important causes when the experience of working on them isn't satisfying. We have too many options.

The best leader in the world makes three straightforward commitments that help them create an environment where people want to work together and value the experience so deeply they keep coming back. Each time they soak up the leaders behaviors, the actions that truly create connections among people, and they begin to become leaders too.

The best leader in the world commits to:

- **Clarity.** They have mastered how to interact with people. Most leaders want to tell people what to do and have them do it. That's normal, and in the end it never works. Clarity is discovered, not forced. It starts when we get clear in the core areas of what we do—strategy, market, product—and then openly share information. And there is a second, just as essential way to fulfill the commitment: seek answers together. Great leaders know how to help their teammates figure out what their people really want to do, and give them clear targets that meet their personal goals as they fulfill the organization's objectives. They know how to take any problem and make it a team challenge rather than one leader's responsibility. *The perfect customer service at Zappo's is because reps know what to do and like doing it.*
- **Stability.** They know how to offer all the resources teammates need, and as they do, build a culture of trust in their organization where people realize that nothing is out of bounds. Trust is not a soft word for leaders who know how to create it. When people can always say what they really think, and then teams figure out what they need to reach new levels of success, no idea is lost and new possibilities emerge every day. Trust is the essential precursor for teammates to build their confidence so they'll take risks. *Think of Ernest Shackleton, who brought one and a half tons of bacon, fruits and cakes along with a printing press to write a book in the long winter months so his Nimrod team could set a series of records in the harshest, most dangerous conditions of Antarctica. No team can fail with the security of enough bacon.*
- **Rhythm.** They know how to reduce or eliminate distractions for their people, so results happen as stress is reduced. The patterns of our lives produce the flow of effort and experience that generates our best outcomes. The best leader in the world pays attention to how the work happens and how to support teammates without getting in the way so everyone builds a consistent cadence of effort and renewal. *Think of Edison and his 1093 patents from a lab that hummed with teams of inventors for decades and birthed General Electric.*

# Why These Three Commitments?

Using these three commitments to build a team of leaders emerged from our frustration with the leadership development programs available to us. We have led the leadership development of entire corporations, sales teams, and non-profit communities. We realized that what we were teaching wasn't working, so we looked at what great leaders were doing. We broke down the simple realities that each of us need to stay focused on what matters most. That's not what most leadership development programs teach.

In the midst of days where we have too much to pay attention to and triggers stressing us out from every direction, leadership programs ask us to learn 50 rules, 16 box matrices, and 12 steps. We may be able to apply these methods in the classroom, but under pressure? At the end of a stressful day? The attempts by most courses to help us deal with the complexity of our organizations and 21st century challenges add yet another level of complexity that leaders never use when they most need a model to guarantee success.

What leaders need to do to be the kind of people others love to work with is straightforward. The best leader in the world commits to clarity because she knows what success looks like, she listens to others definitions of a better future, and she wants to build it with a team that discovers *together* how to make their goals a reality.

She commits to stability because she knows what people need and how to create work and life experiences where people trust each other and want to repeat the feeling they get working together every day.

She commits to rhythm because she looks out for what will get in the way, and she both clears paths for her team, and trains them so they are as capable as she is of overcoming obstacles.

To commit is to pay attention. The best leader in the world knows where to pay attention: to three words. Because leading is never easy, we realized we all need three sticky words to focus on. Whether the world is on fire and we have to keep people safe, or we're in the middle of the ordinary grind and we want people to be their best, these three commitments are the essential elements of an environment where people savor working together and produce their best work. Breaking down leadership into three core commitments means you never have to think about how to lead; because you have three words to focus on you will never forget.

## Does Your Culture Embody the Three Commitments?

Once you know why you lead and you make the three commitments for yourself, the final step before building your team of leaders is making sure your culture is the kind of environment where true leadership is valued. All cultures can embody the three commitments, but some are so stressed, political, and embedded in old patterns that the transformation takes years. The commitments are not just how you become a great leader, they are also a simple assessment, a lens for looking at the places where you lead.

You can tell whether an environment is ready to grow leaders with three simple questions:

- 1. Is everything clear?** Goals, best practices, expectations.
- 2. Is everything stable?** Resources, training, the culture.
- 3. Does your work have rhythm?** Predictable patterns, engagement, and even a happy cadence of work that draws people in day after day?

Instantly, the three commitments reveal why a culture or organization is struggling, and where to focus your attention as a leader to make a difference. You have answers about how to create more clarity, stability, and rhythm for you and your organization. Is your organization open to more of what you know is possible? The best leader in the world is always looking to improve their culture, even when facing others who don't want to change or don't know they need to.

You may want to build a team of leaders, but you can't if your environment is not open to supporting their development. For instance, if you don't have a development plan for every teammate, no matter how much they like you or how enthusiastic they are about what you do, they'll eventually struggle to see where your work together benefits their growth. Their lack of clarity created by your lack of a clear path to success leads to a destabilized environment for them and any rhythm they develop gets blocked by worries about their future.

On the other hand, when every employee is clear about what they want, how it ties to their daily work, where they can keep improving, and how you'll help them develop, now you have an environment committed to each person's growth and happiness. A culture that embodies the three commitments is ready to develop teams of leaders.

*Where you're spending your time and energy each day is what you're giving your life to, and we don't want you to waste a moment.*

# The Forgetting Curve and Leadership Development

Would you be happier as a leader or a member of a leadership team if you trusted everyone to be as committed and capable of producing results as you are?

It's not that we don't want a team of leaders to support us, we simply don't pay attention to leadership development. We're too busy and often too distracted. We attempt to pass on skills, both the specifics of what we do and the essential traits of great leadership that make our team excellent. Then we fall victim to the forgetting curve.

The German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus discovered the precipitous speed at which we forget in 1885. He created a series of nonsense sounds, sounds that didn't have a previous history or meaning to him, and he studied them. He then recorded the rate at which they left his memory. His research revealed that we *lose information fast* if it's not practiced.

Whether you're a leader in a corporation, government, or public service, here's the continual challenge: if it's been twenty minutes since you or your people reviewed or practiced the new skill or habit you just taught them, they've already forgotten 40 percent of what you told them. That new set of requirements you just delivered at your weekly team meeting, if it's been an hour, they've already nearly lost 60 percent of the information. Two days from the first time you help someone learn what they need to know to be a brilliant leader, without review or practice they'll retain around a quarter of the learning. Add the complexity of most leadership models to the forgetting curve and we have a leadership development problem that is stifling.

And there's another reason we're not developing leaders. There is a cultural myth that leaders are born with the stuff needed to inspire and rally the troops. This myth is dangerous; it covers

up the work great leaders do to become who they are. Before his political rise, for instance, John F. Kennedy led in almost every organization in which he participated, from the Boy Scouts to athletic and drama teams at Harvard and his PT boat in WWII. He actually had to use family connections to get into the war early, and he asked to enlist during the war's most treacherous period. He had family resources and expectations that he would become a leader, and he used them to become the person whose speeches we remember and whose actions as President of the United States ultimately helped prevent nuclear war, established new civil rights, and began the modern era of space exploration. He could have just as easily lived off his trust fund and bummed around the world on a sailboat. Kennedy chose to train as a leader: to get into the war, to get into politics, and ultimately to seek the Presidency.

If you want to be the best leader you can be, you have to practice. If you are a leader or manager in any organization and you want to create a team of people who can lead as well as you can, they have to practice. The simple measurement for who on your team is ready to be a leader? *How much do they practice?* To be a top-performer or effective teammate, each environment has skills people need to master. The people who practice are almost always the best. Want to know if someone is ready to lead, find the people who regularly practice the skills of their job.

But what we practice to be great leaders can't be complicated. Here's the story we keep hearing: "I picked up this awesome book on leadership at the train station. I read it in one sitting." We then ask: "How did it change you?" The repeated reply is: "I don't remember any of it."

The content is actually wonderful. The stories, exercises, and models are both theoretically and philosophically valuable. If we had more time, if, as the new studies reveal, we weren't working 50, 60, 70, and sometimes even 80 hours a week, we might be able to apply the ideas. The simple fact is we can't or don't. Even the best intentions to practice can be squashed when we don't apply the knowledge in a sustainable way. The best way to make the practice a regular habit: find your team of leaders and practice together.

# Build Your Team of Leaders

To build a team of leaders:

- 1. We reflect on why we want to lead.**
- 2. We make three commitments to become the kind of leader people love to work with.**
- 3. We make sure our environment is ready to fulfill the three commitments.**
- 4. We find the people who know how to practice.**

Then, we ask them “Why?” They have to know their core motivation. We have to know their core motivation as a first exercise in becoming clear about why we want to work together through the ugly and brilliant days.

Next, ask them to apply the three commitments to their work. Each morning, ask your teammate to determine where they can create a little more clarity, stability, and rhythm. It’s similar to the idea of Kaizen—the philosophy of constant improvement first implemented in Japan where the goal is to make a small improvement each day. The difference for leaders is that we can’t just make any improvement.

We have to make improvements in areas that create an environment that attracts, trains, and retains talented people. We have to establish a culture where people know what’s expected and they feel safe enough to take the risks to fulfill those expectations. We have to build organizations and, in fact, an entire world, where people can see the challenges and opportunities around them, feel empowered, and know that each day they can impact their progress toward the goals they desperately want to achieve.

When you have a team of people that knows why they want to lead, they won't quit when the work gets hard and you can remind them of their core motivation when they forget under the strain and pressure. When you can talk about how to fulfill the three commitments, you know that together, every day, you're creating the environment for what you want to happen. When you actually make the small investments in building more clarity, stability, and rhythm, you can measure everything from the satisfaction of your teammates to the core metrics of what you do, and you will see the results get better.

And you know what the biggest change will be? Instead of the political snake pits that most teams can become, instead of the emotional soap operas many organizations begin to act out, you and your teammates value each other and truly make things better.

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# The Teams of Leaders Are All Around You

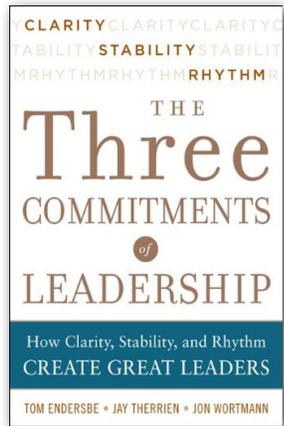
When Mother Theresa began feeding the poor and caring for the sick, she had a few nuns. When she died, she had almost 5000 monks and nuns committed to the work she began. Martin Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks didn't lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott. They had a team of 50,000 leaders who wanted to bring freedom. Nelson Mandela, Susan B. Anthony, George Washington: Name a leader who fought for freedom and they had a team of leaders who made their accomplishments possible.

We still give credit to those who have the courage to stand up and speak, but the leaders who build teams never take the credit alone. In the revolutions of 2011 that swept countries like Egypt and Libya, Wael Ghonim was a Google executive who was arrested for his online organizing. He was held, tied up, and beaten. But when he was freed, he kissed the guards who held him. When he addressed the crowds, he said he was just a man typing on a keyboard. He said to the crowd, "You are the heroes." With his kisses and his words, he made clear that every person who stood up for freedom was a leader. His tools of leadership development cost nothing, and the team of leaders he developed will keep fighting for opportunity because they fight together.

We have to do the same. In a world where the trouble is global and the needs are endemic, at work and in our communities, we can make every teammate, every neighbor a member of our team. That doesn't mean we suddenly all agree and like each other. That doesn't mean we immediately reach our goals. It means in every goal we pursue and every action we take, we know we are not alone. The same technology and global needs that have bogged us down and distracted us from developing leaders can also become the tools we use to connect to others with the same mission.

**Together we can be a team of leaders, committing to pay attention to what people need to love working together, until the clarity, stability, and rhythm we all need is a part of every human life. 🙏**

# info



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