

## EXCERPT FROM: BECOMING A RESONANT LEADER (2008)

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### LEADERSHIP IS LEARNED

People often ask us whether leadership can be learned. It is the old nature-versus-nurture question: are people born to be good leaders, or do they develop leadership abilities over time? The answer is yes to both. Some characteristics of good leadership—the tendency to be optimistic, for example—are traits we are probably born with.

But inborn characteristics are few, and even most of these can be enhanced and leveraged (or conversely, underutilized). Far more elements of effective leadership are learned. Of course, family experiences in early childhood, school, community, and work all shape our abilities to build and sustain relationships, guide and manage ourselves, and influence others. We learn critical leadership competencies throughout life. But these abilities never become set in stone: they can and do change, and **by intentionally attending to our own development, we do become better leaders.**

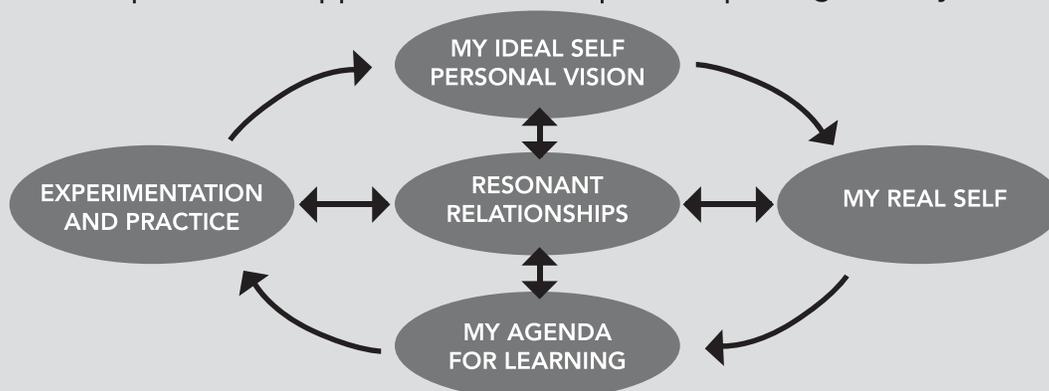
How and when do people change? People learn and develop when what they *want to change matters deeply and will affect them both personally and professionally.*

In other words, people can become better leaders and can change long-held patterns of behavior. But we have to want to change, and the path we chart for ourselves has to be personally meaningful. It's not just about leadership development. In fact, significant professional growth without personal transformation is impossible.

Changing oneself isn't necessarily easy, and it doesn't usually happen quickly. This is because leadership abilities are tied to patterns of behavior related to self-image, relationship skills, and even worldview. These patterns are deep-seated; often we have behaved the same way for so long we are no longer fully aware of what we do or why we do it. But when we have a picture of a future we really want, we discover a path for change and the energy and enthusiasm necessary to sustain the process of reinventing ourselves. This is why creating a clear and compelling life vision is the first and most important step in becoming a resonant leader.

### INTENTIONAL CHANGE

Significant and sustainable change occurs only when people engage in a *process* of Intentional Change. The process is really a series of discoveries about oneself: one's hopes, dreams, current situation, plans, and supportive relationships to help along the way.



It goes like this: when we (or our organizations, for that matter) really want to change and develop, we need to first realize or reconnect with what is most important to us and who we are. This gives us the energy and the motivation to look closely at what is currently working for us and what is getting in our way.

To spark the desire and energy for change, we need to imagine and articulate an Ideal Self: who could I be if I were at my very best, living and working effectively, fully, and happily? A meaningful vision of ourselves and our future engages our desire to move toward that future and gives us the courage to try. As you read, reflect on, and do the exercises in this book, the positive feelings you experience when you consider an image of a meaningful, viable future will help power and sustain your drive for growth and change. And, notably, your hunger to achieve your desired future helps you stay engaged, resilient, and flexible in the face of setbacks or other disappointments.

Next, after we have discovered our Ideal Self and Personal Vision, we need to have a clear sense of our Real Self: who we are today, our strengths and weaknesses, and how we influence others. Assessing our real selves can be done in many ways, but it requires that we reflect deeply and honestly and engage with others to share perceptions and to receive feedback.

After we have made the first two discoveries, the third discovery is the creation of a plan to address gaps between the real and the ideal and to build on our current strengths. Often we need to learn new skills or expose ourselves to different situations in order to achieve our dreams. Getting from the real to the ideal requires a plan. Our research indicates that people plan in different ways, so these plans must reflect not only how people think about the future, but also how they tend to act when moving toward it. <sup>6</sup> It must be a learning agenda filled with excitement and the joy of discovery, not one with the feeling of obligation of a to-do list.

Then, of course, we need to experiment and practice. Long-lasting behavioral change happens only when people have opportunities to try new behaviors and develop new habits in relatively safe and nonjudgmental environments. This means that we need other people—people who care about us, are interested in our development, and will tell us the truth. We learn best in the context of supportive relationships, so for a change process to work, we need to deliberately include people who can help us maintain focus on our learning agenda.

## **THE TIME IS NOW**

Leaders like you are in positions to make big gains and big mistakes. You have an impact on many people—in your teams, institutions, and communities. You can make a difference when you choose to reach for your personal best, to inspire and energize people, to call them to action, and to reach for a brighter future.

None of this happens by accident. Change—real and sustained change—happens when we have the courage to reach for our dreams and recognize that we might not achieve those dreams unless we, ourselves, change how we are going about leadership and life.

***Let us begin the journey.***



## IDEAL SELF



*"It's impossible", said pride. "It's risky," said experience. "It's pointless", said reason. "Give it a try", whispered the heart. Author Unknown*



**Task: Please prepare, write, journal, a series of a few paragraphs or a collection of images and words, as you begin to think about and compose your picture of aspirational leadership self. You can choose any of the questions below that help you to think about this. You may also look through magazines or online images and collect pictures and/or words that you feel best represent the leadership self you might strive for. This needs to be a collection of ideas you bring and then we will work individually and together to polish those into a leadership vision, through our time together.**

### IDEAL SELF:

*(taken from Article, "Expanding How we Define Coach Effectiveness", [2016] Dr S. Taylor et. al.)*

The ideal self is symbolically manifested through the expression of a vision statement or desired image (Boyatzis et al., 2015). The ideal self is the intrinsic motivation to move in a direction of self-directed change. Therefore, the ideal self represents one's hopes, dreams, aspirations, and/or desired future self. The ideal self is not experienced as an obligation or an onerous responsibility (i.e., the "ought" self).

Boyatzis and colleagues (2015) propose that the ideal self activates the default mode network of the brain and the parasympathetic nervous system which, in turn, aid in neurogenesis and social bonding, both critical components for sustained change.

Expression of some aspect of the leader's ideal self in the form of a vision statement is not a goal statement. Vision statements are not concrete or necessarily practical. Instead, they are idealistic and lofty, but they garner the focused attention and commitment of the leader. A comprehensive vision expresses one's passion, purpose, core values and/or the results she or he desires to achieve. Vision statements animate, transform purpose into action, create purpose and meaning, instill confidence, and motivate the leader to take a stand for a preferred future.

An example of one leader's vision reads:

*I will work to have my interactions with others be uplifting and edifying, whereby we leave more hopeful and more optimistic.*

Another example of an educator and coach:

*"I coach to heal and transform the world. I coach teachers and leaders to discover ways of working and being that are joyful and rewarding, that bring communities together, and that result in positive outcomes for children. I coach people to find their own power and to empower others so that we can transform our education system, our society and our world." (p. 30, E. Aguilar).*

**Coaching questions that help leaders to discover their ideal self include the following:**

- Who helped you the most to be the person you are today?
- What do you wish your life to be like in 7-10 years?
- Describe the characteristics of who you are in your imagined ideal self.
- What kind of person would you love to be?
- What values and virtues do you wish you could live?
- What is your passion?
- What do you wish your legacy to be?
- What are your core values and beliefs?
- Which aspects of your core identity do you wish to maintain and are central to your beliefs about being a good person?

