



CHAPTER ONE

BECOMING A LEADER DEVELOPER

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It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.

—JOHN WOODEN, HALL OF FAME BASKETBALL COACH

I was one month away from promotion to major in 1998 when my father, a career Army officer of thirty-two years, passed away. In our final conversation, I asked him how I would know if I was a successful leader. His answer provided me a definition of success that changed the way I see myself as leader, whether leading as a soldier, husband, father, or community member. He told me not to look at my rank or, for that matter, any of the medals or badges on my uniform: these are just things created to make ourselves feel important, and they are really the results of the efforts of others. He told me not to read my efficiency reports or performance reviews: these were merely overinflated pieces of paper designed to get me promoted. He also told me not to ask my boss: the boss might tell me only what I wanted to hear or whatever it took to get me out of his office so he could get back to work.

My father told me that for a leader, the true measure of success is found in the eyes of your direct reports, the embrace of your spouse, and the hearts of your children. I believe him. The embrace of your spouse and the hearts of your children are subjects for another venue. But when was the last time you looked into the eyes of those who work for you in order to measure yourself as a leader?

When you look into the eyes of your soldiers, or employees, or direct reports, you cannot escape your real worth as a leader. Every time I have turned the leadership of my soldiers over to another officer, I gathered them around me for one

last face-to-face good-bye, one last chance to thank them for their service to me, each other, and our nation. What my boss had written in my performance reviews about my leadership performance faded from my mind as I looked each soldier in the eye for the last time. Their eyes told me they would be better leaders not because of who *I* was but because of the time and effort I had invested in the deliberate development of them as men and women. No medal can trump that feeling.

One of the most important things you can do as a leader is to develop other leaders. Those leaders will affect hundreds, if not thousands, of other people.

Leader Development: The True Measure of a Leader's Success

Are you successful as a leader? Before you answer, consider this scenario. I am looking for a master carpenter to produce a handcrafted wooden desk for you as a token of appreciation for all you have done for the organization. This is not just any desk, but a great desk that reflects the strength and integrity of both giver and recipient. I have selected a master carpenter based on the quality of the products of his labor. By selecting this carpenter to build your desk, I passed up other carpenters with more impressive woodworking power tools and state-of-the-art showrooms. I also ignored some carpenters who have created thousands of production-line desks in their manufacturing plants. These others are very efficient, but to them, your desk was just another dollar figure in their profit margins. The bottom line is that I judged each carpenter by evaluating the wood on which they labored, not the carpenters themselves or their tools.

That brings me back to my original question. Are you a successful leader developer? Along with managing resources and setting direction for your group or unit, you have a responsibility to develop your subordinate leaders. As leaders, we often place heavy emphasis on the bottom line and our personal accomplishments. But think ahead to your retirement dinner or ceremony: Would you prefer a slide show and handouts detailing all the deals you made, complete with statistics and charts demonstrating your prowess at leading within the organization, or do you want to share one last evening with those whose lives your leadership changed? These are the people who will carry on in your place primarily because of your investment in their

lives. One of the most important things you can do as a leader is to develop other leaders. Those leaders will affect hundreds, if not thousands, of other people.

Leader Development Is a Deliberate Process

Being a leader is harder today than ever before because information processing and decision-making requirements are temporally compressing every year (in other words, you need to assess situations and make decisions faster than ever before), and risks that were once easy to recover from may in fact be fatal in today's environment. One critical decision you must make is whether to let your subordinate leaders develop themselves in a do-it-yourself style or deliberately exert your energy and resources to develop them. And keep in mind that making no decision on this matter is the same as deciding to let your subordinate leaders develop themselves. Leader development must be done deliberately for three reasons.

One critical decision you must make is whether to let your subordinate leaders develop themselves in a do-it-yourself style or deliberately exert your energy and resources to develop them.

First, it is bad reasoning to believe that you were a total self-starter and others wanting to be leaders should be self-starters too. There are psychologically valid theories to support this, but suffice it to say that our memory tricks us into believing that we owe our successes to our own efforts, but our failures are the result of other people or factors beyond our control. If you really believe that you developed yourself into a great leader and somehow dodged the efforts of fate and others to drag you down, you are not only wrong but most likely lonely too.

Second, a good leader would never leave to chance factors that he or she could directly affect; that would be negligence. We exert tremendous energy in setting the conditions for the success of our organizations, whether on the battlefield or in the commercial market. Investing energy and resources to develop subordinate leaders—people who will execute your organization's business at hand and eventually fill your shoes—is a great form of condition setting.

Third, if you do not get personally involved in leader development, you will miss out on the significantly rewarding experience of watching leaders grow personally and professionally. If you have experienced firsthand the satisfaction

of watching a subordinate leader grow in confidence and competence, you know what I mean. But if you have not or if this reward sounds pointless, you really should change your title from “leader” to simply “gatekeeper.”

Three Phases of Leader Development

There are several ways to develop leaders, and what works for one leader may not work so well for another. My experiences as a leader developer, as a developed leader, and as a formal student of leadership research have convinced me that leader development takes time, focused energy, and even risk. (This risk, by the way, is the reason leaders get the big bucks. Reading one book or article or attending a seminar is not enough.)

Three phases of leader development require understanding: learning, leading, and reflecting. These three seasons of reflective leader development form a perpetual cycle, and as a leader matures, the phases occur concurrently as well as sequentially. As a leader developer, you have a role in each phase.

Does your organization value the learner, the teacher, and the learning process itself? By “value,” I mean respecting and providing resources for all three, not merely tolerating the process of formal leadership education as something to complete prior to starting a “real” job.

Phase One: Learning from the Best Leaders

Not all leaders are given the opportunity of a formal leadership education process prior to leading, but it most certainly helps those who get it. The average Army officer spends most of his or her first year in uniform in a formal leadership education system, and the benefits are apparent for these leaders and the soldiers they lead.

If your organization includes formal leadership training and education, take a close look at it. Does your organization value the learner, the teacher, and the learning process itself? By “value,” I mean respecting and providing resources for all three, not merely tolerating the process of formal leadership education as something to complete prior to starting a “real” job. The military, and many other organizations as well, has improved dramatically in this area since the war on terror began.

For example, the BP Group, a petroleum merger of British Petroleum, Amaco, and ARCO, has developed a model program for formally educating and

developing its first-line leaders. Its leader development program was not mapped out at a one-weekend leadership summit or decided on by a single leader. Instead, the senior leadership of BP Group met repeatedly to determine why their junior leaders were not performing well, and they devised and carried out experiments to back up their perceptions. The key to its junior leader development program is the energy and focus the senior leadership of the organization placed on it. This was not just another initiative the company was undertaking; it was a priority. Today, graduates from BP Group's first-line leader training program are running petroleum operations on every continent, and their performance ratings are significantly better than those of nongraduates.

There are specific things you can look at within your organization to assess how valued your leader education and training systems are. Who trains and educates emerging leaders? If your organization truly values the process of leadership development, some of the very best and most experienced leaders will be directly involved as instructors and trainers. Is this the case with your organization? Or is your leader development cadre made up of those who have outlived their usefulness in the organization's operational endeavors?

Not so long ago, there was a time in the Army when being assigned as an instructor or trainer was tantamount to being put out to pasture. That sends a message to everyone in an organization that leader education is unworthy of precious personnel resources, and therefore that it belongs at or near the bottom of the list in terms of priority.

The good news is that the Army has gotten smarter about who trains and educates its leaders. The cadre of leaders in any officer basic course or captain's career course are the Army's best warriors and leaders, most of whom have led troops in combat within the past six months. Assigning the best and brightest as leader trainers benefits the Army significantly. Its leader development systems gain credibility, as does what is taught in the leadership curricula.

Let us say that you are a brand-new second lieutenant attending your officer basic course and your instructor has just returned from commanding a company of 120 soldiers in combat in Iraq or Afghanistan. What he or she teaches becomes more real and relevant by how that instructor teaches it. The experiences of these instructors will directly relate to what their students will experience on graduation.

For example, suppose it is a typical Monday morning at Fort Benning, Georgia, and Second Lieutenant John Doe is seated in a classroom ready to learn how to provide leadership while reacting to enemy sniper fire. In strides Captain Jim Smith, walking with a slight limp: the bullet wound in his left thigh still aches from where he was shot by an enemy sniper in Mosul, Iraq, just three months ago. His unit was two weeks away from returning home when he and several others in the company were on their last combat patrol. Smith does not have to make up a

scenario; he is going to be teaching today's class using his own unit's reaction to an enemy sniper.

The class begins with, "There I was . . ." and ends with the honest recounting of how Smith's actions as the company commander that day saved the lives of several of his soldiers and how his mistakes could have cost others their lives. His students ask questions like, "What did *you* do?" and "What were *you* thinking?"

What the students learn now becomes personally and professionally inspirational and gripping. Captain Smith remembers when he was Lieutenant Smith just four years ago, sitting through the same class and staring at the clock waiting for the class to end; he cannot even remember which fictional vignette his instructor used that day. Today his students stay late to hear more of his story and how much he misses leading soldiers. The story continues tomorrow for the class as Smith reminds them that not every soldier was as fortunate as he was that day in Mosul. The subject for tomorrow is casualty evacuation, and Smith's primary training aid for the class is the dirty, blood-stained scrap of paper he used to record the battle roster numbers and nature of wounds for his unit's casualties that day.

You do not have to have a limp to be an inspirational and gripping leader developer in your organization. You just have to be willing to talk about your scars to those who will be in similar situations in the near future. Find the Captain Smiths in your organization, and show the organization that you care enough about developing leaders—and those they will lead—by valuing their development enough to give them instructors fresh from your battlefields.

Do you ever look at your subordinate leaders, especially those holding jobs that you once performed so well, and wonder why they are not as good as you were? It is unfair to expect your subordinate leaders to know what they have not yet learned or experienced.

Phase Two: Leading

Think back to what it was like to lead for the first time professionally, that is, when it was your job to do so. You may have been a leader on a high school or college sports team or a leader in a Girl or Boy Scout troop or some other civic group. All those experiences are good preparation, but leading in your chosen line of work and getting paid to do so is different from them. This first professional leadership opportunity becomes the cornerstone of your life as a formal leader. It can be many things: a realization of a calling to lead, a test of perseverance, or even a sense that leadership is not for you.

There is one universal truth, though, to every leadership opportunity: it is your chance to lead and take ultimate responsibility for whatever your group or unit does or fails to do. This is a critical fact for all leaders to embrace, but if there is one group of leaders that needs to be reminded of this, it is the leaders who lead other leaders.

Here is an example of what I mean. As a young lieutenant, I was a platoon leader. I led thirty-three men in training and in combat, and I loved every minute of it, especially the cold and rainy days when we were accomplishing difficult missions together. To be certain, I am not the best platoon leader in the history of the U.S. Army, but I was good.

Three years later, I was a captain commanding a howitzer battery roughly triple the size of my old platoon. I got a lot of advice the day I took command, but the phrase I heard more than any other was, “Remember, you’re not a platoon leader any more, so make the ones you have do their job. Don’t do it for them.”

That was great advice but hard to follow at first. In order to move from being a good platoon leader to become a developer of good platoon leaders, I had to understand two things. An opportunity hit me square between the eyes only one month into command.

First, I did not know then what I do now. Do you ever look at your subordinate leaders, especially those holding jobs that you once performed so well, and wonder why they are not as good as you were? If you do, do not feel guilty; it is only natural to do so. We remember all our triumphs and maybe those bad times that turn into funny stories over time, but all the times we were mediocre at best are usually flushed from our memories. It is also natural to look back on our past through the lenses of the competence we hold today. It is hard to remember what it was like when we did not know what we know now, but it is unfair to expect your subordinate leaders to know what they have not yet learned or experienced. Keep in mind that the leaders you develop do not need to relive your experiences; they need their own.

The other thing I had to come to grips with was the fact that my platoon leader days were over. It was someone else’s turn now. If I was busy being a platoon leader again, who would be commanding my battery? So there I was, one month into commanding a light-howitzer battery in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). It was a cold, clear night at our local training area on the Tennessee-Kentucky border, and my unit was about to conduct what is called an artillery raid. Our mission was to insert six howitzers using helicopters behind enemy lines, fire forty-eight rounds of artillery on an enemy target, and extract by helicopter back to a secure area, all within thirty minutes.

I was excited but also overwhelmed. Doing anything at night using only night-vision goggles and no flashlights was hard enough. But we were going to

be sling-loading howitzers beneath the helicopters we were flying. The safety considerations were enormous enough without all the pressure of accomplishing a mission that we might have to do in combat some day.

Time, which I thought was my enemy, really turned out to be on my side after all: I simply did not have the time available as we prepared for this mission to do everything myself. My senior noncommissioned officer, my first sergeant, was with me when our battalion commander gave us the mission. First Sergeant Scott asked me, “This is your first artillery raid. Are you nervous?” As I told him how this mission reminded me of a similar mission I took part in as a young lieutenant in Iraq during the First Gulf War, his eyes lit up. “You know, Sir,” he said, “your lieutenants will have memories just like yours after tonight.” His words carried instant wisdom for me: every leader needs to grow from his or her own experiences in order to reflect later. That was just the beginning of many things I would learn from my first sergeant over the next two years.

Take stock of your subordinate leaders. Write down what they need the most work on and those tasks they accomplish to standard. Then write down those things that they do better than you did when you held their job. If you are truly objective, those things they do better than you did are undoubtedly directly traceable to qualities they already had when they came to your organization. The chances are good that your subordinate leaders are better than you were in ways that you have yet to influence.

My first platoon sergeant, Vern Croley (now a command sergeant major), made this point clear to me when I was his new platoon leader. One of my most important jobs as an artillery platoon leader was to oversee the occupation of a firing point so that my platoon could fire when called on. Croley took me out to the field and had me watch our platoon occupy a firing position without the two of us running things. It was a miserably cold autumn day in Germany, and it was pouring rain. We watched together from a few hundred yards away as our platoon did their job in knee-deep mud and met every time standard in achieving firing capability.

I was incredibly proud and grinning from ear to ear, but Croley was not. “Don’t miss the point, Lieutenant,” he said. “They are very good at doing this. Now you and I need to find out what they’re not good at and make them better.” Eight months later, Croley and I led that platoon into combat. Next to my father and my father-in-law, both Army officers, Croley taught me more about what my duties as an officer and leader were than any other person I have met.

All organizations have men and women just like Vern Croley. You will not meet them at the watercooler or at social functions: they are out getting things done. If you ask them for their advice, be prepared to listen without getting your feelings hurt or your executive ego bruised.

Now go back to the lists of things your subordinate leaders need to improve on or sustain: these are the areas of their leadership performance you can have an impact on. They are also the areas of their performance for which they will remember you as their leader—a leader who cared enough about them and their soldiers or subordinates to make a difference, when others may have just written them off or let them try to figure it out on their own.

In addition to developing leaders, you have a job to do and missions to accomplish. How should we as leaders balance the need to develop leaders and lead winning organizations? For example, as an Army officer, my job is to fight and win the nation's wars. I can develop a good leader stable, but if we cannot get the job done, there are severe and lasting consequences. This is true no matter what line of work you are in. The challenge is to create opportunities for subordinate leaders to learn, and that means letting them fail miserably without dire consequences.

The best way to do that is through training. In the Army, we send units to well-resourced training centers in the California desert, the swampy forests of Louisiana, and the hills of Germany. The goal of the cadre at these training centers is to challenge each unit with a real enemy (we fire blanks against other Army units trying to defeat us) and other stressors of combat. Leaders are given more to do than they or their units have time to accomplish. Little or no sleep is the price for poor time management. The cadre also causes things to go wrong at the worst possible time. The challenges are so extreme that some leaders return from combat to say that getting through a training center rotation was much more difficult than actual combat. What is not the same are the consequences of failure: in combat, people die and lives are changed by wounds and loss, whereas back at the training centers, consequences are felt by the embarrassment of losing a battle to the enemy, only to have your soldiers brought back to life to fight again.

Following each battle at a training center, a unit conducts a lengthy after-action review. These reviews can take hours to complete, and we film them so that the unit can take them home and study them repeatedly. Every soldier, from private to colonel, is required to publicly explain his or her intent and actions during the battle. We are hard on each other and ourselves during this process because we are committed to being as good as we can be when the bullets are real. Without our training centers to challenge us and allow us to fail miserably, only to pick ourselves up and do it again over and over, we would enter combat with nothing more than our imaginations and hope.

Not every organization has the time or resources the Army has to build and run training centers. But our training centers started with a vision that our leaders needed to be challenged and to learn from individual and collective mistakes, and a realization that in order to do this, senior leaders had to create the opportunities for such challenges. You can exercise that same vision within your organization. It

takes determination to place leader development over the excuse that “you and your organization are just too busy to do anything about it.” In fact, you should be arguing that you cannot afford not to do any leader training.

The best leaders loved leading, which meant they placed the welfare of the organization and each of their soldiers ahead of their own self-interests.

Phase Three: Reflecting on Why You Lead

The final lesson for young leaders of practicing leadership is the understanding of why they lead, and perhaps an objective assessment of whether they should continue to lead. This is where the leader development component of reflecting begins. Some of the most dynamic and competent leaders I have worked for in the Army all had a few things in common.

First and foremost, they loved leading, and for each of them, that meant placing the welfare of the organization and of each of their soldiers ahead of their own self-interests. They also led in a manner demonstrating that exercising authority meant exercising good stewardship. For the steward leader, this means believing that leadership exists for the good of the organization and the follower, not for the ego or reputation of the leader.

Colonel Ken Keen is an outstanding example of this. In spite of all his accomplishments, he is amazingly humble. I was serving in the 75th Ranger Regiment in 2000 when the Army chief of staff, General Eric Shinseki, decided that the Army would begin wearing the black beret as standard-issue headgear. This decision generated much discussion, especially because since 1951, the black beret had been worn only by rangers serving in the 75th Ranger Regiment or in the Ranger Training Brigade. The black beret was part of our persona as rangers; it immediately made all rangers distinctive within the Army. Army Rangers conduct highly specialized combat operations as the U.S. Army’s most elite airborne infantry regiment. The 75th Ranger Regiment is the only operational ranger unit, and it is made up of roughly twelve hundred rangers. Just to be considered for service in the Rangers, a soldier must complete months of specialized training, the successful completion rate of which is less than 50 percent.

The commander of the 75th Ranger Regiment at this time was Colonel Keen, now a brigadier general. Keen was the epitome of what all special operations soldiers should be: a quiet professional. He was not meek by any means, and he led by example from the front, where everyone could see him. When it became

public knowledge that the entire Army would soon wear the black beret, Keen received a lot of encouragement from many directions to dig his heels in and resist giving up the black beret as something only for rangers.

As he met with the rangers he commanded, they all asked him about what he thought about the rest of the Army getting the coveted black beret. He never dodged the question once, and he never said anything negative about General Shinseki or his decision. Instead, he left every ranger knowing that he cared about them, the ranger regiment, and the Army more than he did about his own ego or personal pride. And in June 2001, every soldier in the Army donned the black beret, and Colonel Keen's rangers donned their new tan berets. Mountains did not crumble, and neither did the ranger regiment. This leader with a long-term vision was able to place the welfare of his organization over his or her own ego and legacy.

Self-effacing leadership makes sense for the Army. But what about organizations where profit is most important? If this is the case in your organization, I suggest you make two decisions. First, you need to decide whether profit really is the most important thing in your organization. Then you need to decide how well you can achieve profit with poor subordinate leadership or by allowing your leaders to develop in a do-it-yourself manner.

If you are fortunate enough to survive with the leader development philosophy of letting the best naturally rise to the top, I caution you on the outcomes of doing so. Those who naturally rise to the top will probably do so by pleasing you or whomever they work for within the organization. They will probably be the best-looking people in your organization, and they will most likely be upwardly focused and very good at taking care of their boss or bosses while depriving their subordinates of real leadership.

There are simple ways to check to see if this is the case:

- Ask their followers about what kind of leadership they are getting, and really listen to what they say.
- If their answers are vague and generic, ask tough questions that get to the heart of assessing good and poor leadership.
- Listen to how your junior leaders talk to you about their subordinates. Are they all too willing to point the finger of blame at a subordinate rather than taking responsibility?
- When your junior leaders ask you for resources, consider whether they are concerned more with pleasing you as the boss or with getting their followers what they need and deserve.

If your assessment leads you to the conclusion that your subordinate leaders have forgotten (or perhaps never learned) that their authority is not a perk but a

responsibility, then set the example for them by communicating clearly that you bear the blame for allowing them to practice sycophancy instead of leadership.

When you begin assessing what type of development your subordinate leaders need, remember that any shortcomings are more your responsibility than theirs. Unfortunately, some young leaders will never see beyond themselves to the responsibilities they have for their followers and to the organization. Others will be wonderful with people but incompetent in critical skills. Do your absolute best to develop such leaders, but if they do not or will not improve, then it is probably time to remove them from a position of leadership, and perhaps even from the organization. As leaders determine why they lead, they need to always remember that leadership is a privilege, not a right.

Imagine yourself as a head football coach and your team is down by six points with two minutes left in the final quarter. Then your team gets the ball deep in your own territory. Who do you want taking the snaps as quarterback: some hot-shot rookie or a seasoned veteran who has been in this position dozens of times? My guess is that even if the seasoned veteran led the team to wins in this position only half of the time, you would still want him leading your team. What makes his experience so valuable is not merely the fact that he has been in this situation before, but that he has had years to reflect on those experiences of leading under pressure. Reflection is the ideal synthesis of what we have learned and what we have done, and there are things to be learned by reflecting on both our successes and failures as leaders.

While reflecting on what we learn about leadership and what we do while practicing leadership, the goal is not to be too impressed with our successes or too disheartened about our failures. Part of leader development is requiring leaders to become better because of their leadership experiences but not to live in their past, bad or good. Reflection makes a leader greater than the sum of just his or her experiences and things he or she has learned. It is the cognitive process that allows us to be exponentially better leaders following each evolution of our own leader development and prior to taking on increasing leadership responsibilities.

Some people are naturally reflective through introspection and constantly seek ways to improve as a leader. Others need a little coaching to start the reflective process in motion.

It would be nice if leaders could reflect on what they have learned and their leadership experiences without distraction, and some leaders may get this opportunity. But reflection can occur even while driving to and from the office. I have always done some of my most effective reflecting when I run. If you and your subordinate leaders do not have a regular routine when reflection comes into play, set aside some time each day for reflection.

Final Thoughts

Successful leader development comes down to your deciding what your legacy as a leader will be. Remember that desk I am having made for you, the one I described at the beginning of this chapter? I am glad I did not hire the carpenter with the impressive power tools and the state-of-the-art showroom: he thought too much of himself. I am also glad I did not choose the one who produces thousands of great desks; he was interested only in getting done with your desk, like countless other desks, so he could get paid. Instead, the carpenter I selected understands that he is judged as a carpenter by the quality of the wood on which he labors, not his tools or the number of desks he makes.

Being a good leader developer begins with the realization that the judgment of your leadership that will mean the most to you will be based on the wood on which you labor. The development of your subordinate leaders is much more important to your organization than any of your other credentials.

I am willing to bet that on the day you finally leave your current leadership position, knowing that you have developed your subordinate leaders will be more personally and professionally satisfying than any watch or plaque you might receive.