

What Is Your Life Story?

We are the mosaic of all our experiences.
—Kevin Sharer, chairman and CEO, Amgen

The process of becoming a True North leader starts with discovering your leadership gifts by understanding your unique life story.

In this chapter you have the opportunity to look back at your life story and understand the important elements in your experience. You will be exploring how they fit together to define you as a unique individual and provide your capacity to lead. This is the starting point for gaining greater self-awareness and for understanding what your life and your leadership are all about.

During the 125 interviews we conducted with authentic leaders for *True North*, these leaders consistently told us that they found their purpose for leadership through understanding their life stories. Their stories enabled them to remain grounded in who they are and stay focused on their True North.

These leaders did not define themselves by their characteristics, traits, or styles. Although some tried to emulate great leaders early in their lives, they soon learned that emulating someone else's leadership did not result in their becoming effective leaders.

Some interviewees did not see themselves as leaders at all, even though they had been identified by others as exemplary leaders. Instead, they viewed themselves as people who wanted to make a difference and who inspired others to join with them in pursuing common goals. By understanding and framing their life stories, they found their passion to lead and were able to discover their True North. As a result, they were able to sustain their leadership purpose, achieve lasting success, and realize the fulfillment of leadership.

EXERCISE 1.1: MY PATH OF LIFE

In this first exercise, you are going to draw the path of your life to date, like the example you see in Figure 1.1. On the facing page is a workspace for drawing your own path of life. Label the lower left corner of the page “Birth” and the upper right “Present Day.” Begin to draw the path of your life from one corner to the other.

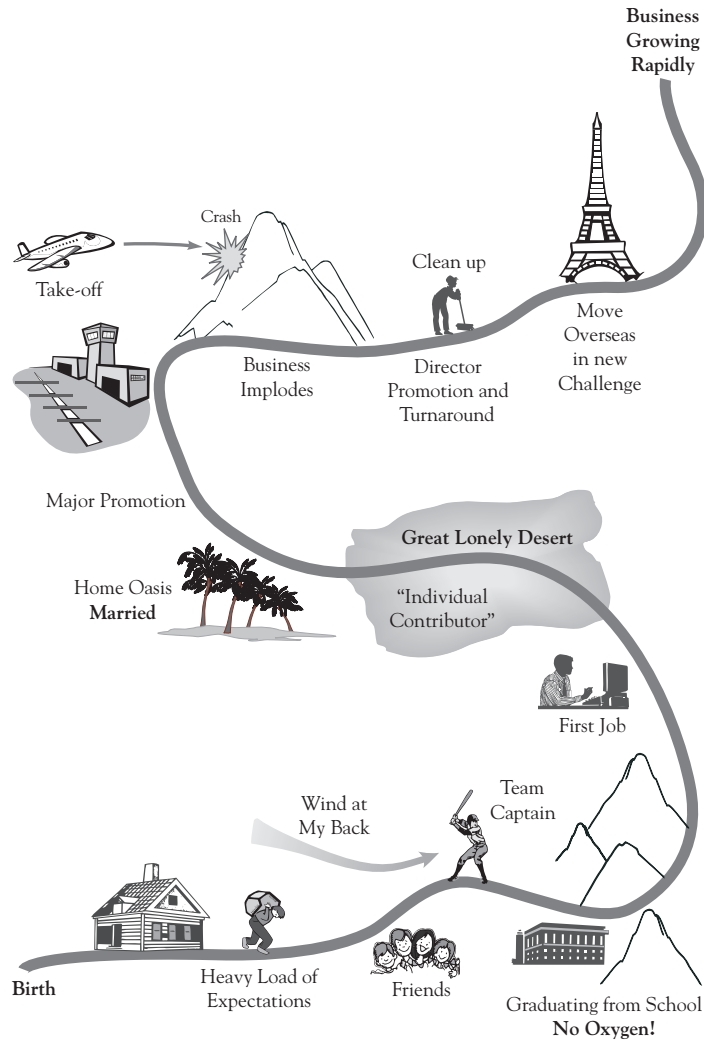


Figure 1.1 Path of Life Example

Your Path of Life

Let the terrain of your path be unique to who you are. Include mountains and valleys, cities and wilderness, forks, bridges, cliffs.

Add in houses, buildings, and so on along the path, representing places you have lived. Likewise, indicate key people and key events with pictures or a diagram along or across the path.

Add representations of your family, your work, your spiritual life, other life pursuits you have had . . . anything that is meaningful to you.

Be creative and allow your story to unfold in front of you.

Looking at the path, divide your life story into four or five chapters marked by major changes or transitions in your life. Give each chapter a descriptive title and add it to your path.

LEARNING FROM YOUR LIFE STORY

Stories are the way you capture your experiences in a form that you can understand and that you can communicate to others. There are three elements to bear in mind about the life story work in this personal guide.

First, the story you have to tell depends on the point of view you take in regard to it. For our purposes, it is sufficient to draw the distinctions between telling your story as a hero, a victim, or a knowledgeable bystander. Your story work will be most helpful if you cultivate the perspective of a knowledgeable bystander rather than that of a hero or a victim. If you are a hero, you will miss out on what you need to work on. As a victim, you will miss out on your strengths. As a knowledgeable bystander, you can be your own friend or mentor who won't pull any punches, but who is definitely on your side.

Second, your story may change dramatically depending on the time that has passed since it happened and the situation you are in when you tell it. When telling the story of your leadership, try to relate both the long sequence of events and all the smaller details you remember. Do your best to tell the story from start to finish so that you can capture the heart of each episode.

Third, a story differs depending on whether you are seeking balance and resolution in telling the story or are cultivating a dialogue and opening up points of tension. Telling the story of your struggle to make a leadership decision can capture the uncertainties and possibilities in your leadership that remain to be resolved. We

are all trained to tell stories that give closure and resolution. When it comes to the story of your leadership development, it is unlikely that there will be a clear resolution. But the messy, problematic aspects of your story may be the most interesting and useful in thinking about where your life experiences are leading you.

Now let's shift our focus to the life story of the most important leader in your life: **you**.

EXERCISE 1.2: LEARNING ABOUT MY LEADERSHIP

Reviewing your Path of Life, think back over all your leadership experiences in your lifetime. Choose the leadership experience of which you are proudest. In this exercise, put yourself back in that time and describe it as if it were happening to you right now.

Describe your proudest leadership experience, starting with the specific events.

What happened?

What was the history or climate of the organization I was in?

What triggered the experience? What caused me to step up and lead?

What was the outcome? What changed in the people in the organization as a result?

How did I feel . . .

Before stepping up to lead?

When I first stepped up to lead?

When facing the challenges of the situation?

After the results were in?

What things did I just learn about my leadership as I told this story?

1.

2.

3.

Telling your story is an important part of authentic leadership development. Writing your story down gives you a point of reference and helps you gain perspective on yourself.

Now let's probe more deeply into your experience so that you can gain even greater insight into your own story.

What leadership qualities did I bring to that leadership experience?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

How did those qualities contribute to the outcome? Link an outcome to each of the qualities you listed above.

<i>My Leadership Quality</i>	<i>Its Effect on the Outcome</i>
1.	_____
2.	_____
3.	_____
4.	_____
5.	_____

Draw on what you have read in *True North* about the dimensions of authentic leadership. Referring to the experience you just related, rate yourself on the following statements using a 1–5 scale (1 = Not at all and 5 = Very strongly):

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Rating</i>
I understood my purpose.	_____
I practiced my values.	_____
I understood my motivations.	_____
I used my support team.	_____
I was an integrated leader.	_____

Now, be your own mentor.

Turn back to this story again and look at it from the perspective of the leader you have become since that time.

If I were mentoring myself at that time, what advice would I give?

In the same spirit, make a list for yourself.

One thing I did really well:

One thing I could have done better:

One thing I could try next time:

In this exercise, you've taken an important step in understanding who you are as a leader and what is important and effective in your leadership. You have thought about what happened, who you were then, and how you can learn from that peak leadership experience.

AUTHENTICITY AND EFFECTIVENESS

How are authenticity and effectiveness related? You may worry that by being truly authentic in the workplace you will sacrifice the performance edge that has gotten you this far. You may be concerned about deviating from expected norms, or not being recognized as a leader. You may worry that you will be exposed to disappointment when you put yourself on the line and things do not work out. These are understandable concerns. There are many constraining models of leadership that discourage us from exploring our authentic leadership.

We have found that authentic leaders inspire trust and loyalty. They perform at superior levels because they are intensely focused on a powerful purpose for their leadership. They are also able to remain grounded through success or failure. By being committed, they are able to pick themselves up and keep moving even after the most devastating setbacks. Next we will explore the relationship between your authenticity and your effectiveness.

EXERCISE 1.3: AUTHENTICITY AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

The purpose of this exercise is to take stock of how you think authenticity affects your leadership.

I have the following thoughts about being both authentic and effective as a leader:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How does being authentic make me more effective right now?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

YOUR JOURNEY TO AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Experience is often said to be the best teacher. Experience is, however, not necessarily a kind or clear teacher. Your life story is in part a chronicle of your experiences in the world. Looking at earlier and later chapters, you will notice contrasts. In one chapter, you may have been preparing to lead. In another, you may have focused on leading or simply trying to make your way in the world. Some passages may be marked by education or apprenticeship—times when you were operating in the context of rules that structured and measured your activities. Later chapters may come in a different context, perhaps marked by increased responsibilities and fewer rules and structures.

The interesting thing is that most post-education experiences are perceived as learning experiences only in retrospect. At any given moment, you will probably not have the feeling that you are preparing or training. You will be in the thick of your life. If you pay attention to the possibilities in each situation or crisis, however, every day can be a lesson on your journey to True North.

Now let's look at your leadership story from another perspective. Whereas you told the previous story as if you were experiencing it in real time, now you are going to tell this story from satellite height, surveying the whole story of your life and leadership. This story does not need to be bounded by what many leaders conventionally think of as their career or work-related life. Through our interviews we learned that the pre-career years of a leader's life were frequently the most formative and were often the most significant contributors to both the type of leaders they became and the formation of their True North.

EXERCISE 1.4: MY LIFE STORY

In this exercise, you will be looking at each of the chapters in your life story to identify the people, events, and experiences that have had the greatest impact on your life.

Start by looking back at the chapters you identified in your path of life (Exercise 1.1).

What people, events, and experiences have had the greatest impact on my life?

Consider each chapter in turn, and use the following questions to guide yourself through a process of identifying key trends in your leadership story. Use the list generated above in this exercise and the path of life you drew previously, and also include anything else that occurs to you now.

Begin with your Chapter 1 and use the prompts in Table 1.1 as a guide.

Table 1.1: The Impact of My Life Story

	<i>Chapter 1</i>	<i>Chapter 2</i>	<i>Chapter 3</i>	<i>Chapter 4</i>	<i>Chapter 5</i>
Chapter title					
The experiences in this chapter made me believe . . .					
The experiences in this chapter made me more or less . . .					
If I could go back, these are the things I would have more or less of in this chapter:					
I am affected by what happened in this chapter on a daily basis in these ways:					

Now you are going to look at your story as a whole.

Where do my inspiration and passion for leadership appear first in my story?

How have they developed over time?

Look in particular at the people in your life story. Consider the impact parents, siblings and family members, mentors, and friends had on your inspiration and passion for leadership.

Who had the greatest influences on my leadership?

Look at major experiences in your life story. Consider the influence of early leadership experiences in school, in sports, in your community, or at work.

How have my major leadership experiences influenced my leadership?

How did the events, experiences, transitions, crises, and success within each chapter affect me as a person?

When was I dissatisfied with my leadership, or when did I receive constructive feedback from others about it?

In what situations did I find the greatest fulfillment in leading?

BUILDING ON YOUR STORY

In this chapter, you have started to discover your gifts for leadership by understanding your life story. Laying your whole life out in front of you can be a powerful experience. Rarely do we step back and see the journey we are on. Through the lens of your life story, you can begin to see the wellsprings of your purpose, values, and motivations as a leader. Some of these have come from your proudest leadership experience; others may be speaking to you from major events in your life that defined who you are but seem to have no direct bearing on leadership. Thus you are probably starting to see how your leadership relates to both your work life and your nonwork life.

In the next chapter, you will look deeper into your story. You will begin working on what may initially be uncomfortable subjects: the hazards of leadership and the lessons of adversity. You will find that revisiting difficult experiences and exploring leadership hazards can bring both insight and clarity to your True North.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- Learning from the experiences in your life story holds the key to your development as a leader.
- To learn best from your story, it is important to step away both from the hero's and from the victim's view of your story, and to be an objective observer of yourself.
- Your past leadership experiences point the way to discovering your potential as an authentic leader.
- Each chapter of your life story carries critical lessons that will help you find *your* True North.

SUGGESTED READING

- Baldwin, C. *Storycatcher: How the Power of Story Can Change Our Lives*. Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2005.
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- Gibran, K. *The Prophet*. New York: Knopf, 1951. (Originally published 1923.)
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