

TRUTH ONE

---

YOU MAKE  
A DIFFERENCE

Everything you will ever do as a leader is based on one audacious assumption. It's the assumption that *you matter*.

Before you can lead others, you have to lead yourself and believe that you can have a positive impact on others. You have to believe that your words can inspire and your actions can move others. You have to believe that what you do counts for something. If you don't, you won't even try. Leadership begins with you.

**The Truth Is That You Make a Difference.** It is not a question of "Will I make a difference?" Rather, it's "What difference will I make?" Consider the experience of Melissa Poe.<sup>1</sup>

In 1989 Melissa, then a fourth-grader in Nashville, Tennessee, became very concerned about the natural

environment and the kind of world she and her friends might live in if people didn't start paying attention to their everyday actions. After seeing a television program about pollution that portrayed a very scary future, Melissa asked the question, "Will the future be a safe place to live in when I get older?"<sup>2</sup> She decided she had to do something about it. That night she wrote a letter to President George Bush, Sr., asking him to help stop pollution. At the time, Melissa believed the only way to stop pollution was to get everyone involved and that the only way to get everyone involved was to get someone everyone listened to involved.

For twelve weeks she didn't hear back, but Melissa knew the pollution problem wouldn't wait. So she started to do other things to get people's attention. At home Melissa and her family started recycling, turning lights and faucets off when they weren't in use, and planting trees. She wrote more letters to more politicians such as her local mayor, congressmen, and senators. She called up the local television station and did an on-camera commentary. She wrote to her newspaper. She did everything she could think of to help get people's attention.

Melissa also started a club called Kids F.A.C.E. (Kids For a Clean Environment) so that her friends, who'd been asking how they could help, could do projects together like writing letters, planting trees, and picking up litter. "We knew we were doing small things, but we also knew

it took a bunch of small things to make a big difference,” she told us.

When she still hadn’t heard back from the President after several weeks, Melissa, realizing he was a busy man, felt she needed to do more to get him to see her letter. She decided to make her letter bigger so he couldn’t miss it. She called a local billboard company in her hometown of Nashville and asked whether they would put a billboard up with her letter to the President. The company donated the billboard to Melissa. However, Melissa knew the President would not see her billboard unless it was in Washington, D.C., where the President lived. Again, she called her local billboard company to ask for help. While they couldn’t put up a billboard in Washington, D.C., they were able to connect Melissa to another billboard company that could. In a matter of six months, over 250 billboards were put up all over the United States, including at least one in each state and one just a mile from the White House.

Almost immediately, Melissa began receiving letters from other kids who were as concerned as she was about the environment. They wanted to help. By the time she finally received a response from the President—a disappointing form letter—she no longer needed the help of someone famous to get her message across. Melissa had found within herself the personal power to inspire others to become involved and make a difference.

In January, just six months after she began her journey to get people's attention about the environment, Melissa appeared on the *Today* show to tell her story. It is here that Kids F.A.C.E. grew from a local club to a national organization. Membership swelled. As the organization grew, Melissa's first Kids F.A.C.E. project, a recycling program at her school, led to a manual full of ideas on how to clean up the environment. Then there were other challenges over the years, such as the One in a Million campaign, a successful project that engaged over one million kids to plant one million trees by 2000.

Starting with just six members at her elementary school, Kids F.A.C.E. grew to more than two thousand club chapters in twenty-two countries and more than 350,000 members during the time Melissa was president. (Today there are 500,000 members.) At age seventeen, she stepped aside, joined the board, and handed over the reins to two fifteen-year-olds, saying she was too old for the job. She wanted the organization to always be in kids' hands so that there was always a club for kids and by kids.

## WHATEVER YOU NEED YOU ALREADY HAVE

Is Melissa a leader? Can someone at age nine or seventeen demonstrate the practices of exemplary leadership? Aren't those abilities reserved for people mainly in senior positions in big-time organizations?

Yes, yes, and no. Yes, Melissa is a leader. Yes, you can demonstrate leadership at any age. No, leadership is not about some position in an organization and clearly not just for those in senior positions.

Too often images of who's a leader and who's not are all mixed up in preconceived notions about what leadership is and is not. Conventional wisdom portrays leadership as something found mostly at the top. Myth and legend treat leadership as if it were the private reserve of a very few charismatic men and women. Nothing is further from the truth. Leadership is much more broadly distributed in the population, and it's accessible to anyone who has passion and purpose to change the way things are.

Fast-forward now to June 4, 2009, twenty years after Melissa Poe wrote that letter to the President of the United States. On that night Melissa Poe Hood—she's grown up now, graduated from college, married, and is working—received the Women of Distinction Award from the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). In acknowledging the honor, here's the advice she gave the college women student leaders in the audience:

Change does not begin with someone else. Change begins in your own backyard, no matter your age or your size. I had no idea that one simple

action could change my life so much. Most journeys start this way, with simple motivation and a choice to do something or not. You never know where one step will take you, and you never know where the next one will lead. The difference with being a leader is that you take the step; you take the journey. The greatest obstacle you will ever encounter is yourself. Just like Dorothy never knew that she always had the ticket home, the Scarecrow always had a brain, the Tin Man always had a compassionate heart, even the Cowardly Lion had courage. Everything you need to be a successful leader you already have: your intelligence to see an issue and a way to fix it, your heart to stay motivated, and your courage not to give up. You can't look for the man behind the curtain to solve your concerns. Everything you need you already have. It's all about taking the first step.<sup>3</sup>

Melissa's message shines the spotlight on the first enduring leadership truth. You don't have to look up for leadership. You don't have to look out for leadership. You only have to look inward. You have the potential to lead others to places they have never been before. A nine-year-old Melissa looked inward and found a leader. You can do the same. Leadership begins with you.

## LEADER ROLE MODELS ARE LOCAL

We've been gathering stories about personal best leadership experiences, including this one from Melissa, for three decades. The people we've talked to come from every type of organization, public and private, government and NGO, high-tech and low-tech, small and large, schools and professional services. They are young and old, male and female, and from every ethnic group. They represent every imaginable vocation and avocation. They reside all over the globe. Leaders are found everywhere. Demographics play no role in whether or not someone is going to become an exemplary leader.

After examining the immense variety of stories from so many different people and places, it has also become crystal clear that leadership is not a birthright. It's not about position or title. It's not about power or authority. It's not about celebrity or wealth. It's not about being a CEO, president, general, or prime minister. It's not about being a superstar. And it's most assuredly not about some charismatic gift.

Over the last couple of years, we analyzed data from over a million people around the globe to assess the practices of leaders. The numbers reveal that the behavior of leaders explains more about why people feel engaged and positive about their workplaces than any particular

individual or organizational characteristic. Factors like age, gender, ethnicity, function, position, nationality, organizational size, industry, tenure, and education *together* account for less than 1 percent of the reason that people feel productive, motivated, energized, effective, and committed in their workplaces. The leaders' behaviors, on the other hand, explain nearly 25 percent of the reason.<sup>4</sup> Leadership is not about *who* you are or *where* you come from. It's about *what* you do.

When we first reported on Melissa's story in 1993, we had no idea that in 2009 she'd be a Woman of Distinction. Neither did she. But Melissa knew then, and she knows now, that leadership begins with taking that first step.

Here's something else to consider. For a long time now we've been asking people about the leader role models in their own lives. Not well-known historical leaders, but leaders with whom they've had personal experience. We've asked them to identify the person they'd select as their most important role model for leadership, and then we've given them a list of eight possible categories from which these leaders might come. They can choose from business leader, community or religious leader, entertainer or Hollywood star, family member, political leader, professional athlete, teacher or coach, or other/none/not sure. Take a look at the results.<sup>5</sup>



***Data on Leader Role Models***

<i>Role Model Category</i>	<i>Respondent Age Category</i>	
	<b>18 to 30</b>	<b>Over 30</b>
Family member	40%	46%
Teacher or coach	26%	14%
Community or religious	11%	8%
Business leader	7%	23%
Political leader	4%	4%
Professional athlete	3%	0%
Entertainer	2%	0%
None/not sure/other	7%	4%

Regardless of whether one is under or over thirty years of age, when thinking back over their lives and selecting their most important leader role models, people are more likely to choose a family member than anyone else. Mom and Dad, it turns out, are the most influential leaders after all. In second place, for respondents thirty years of age and under, is a teacher or coach, and the third spot goes to a community or religious leader. For the over-thirty crowd, a business leader is number two. But when we probe further, people tell us that a business leader really means the person who was an immediate supervisor at work, not someone in the C-suite. In third position is a teacher or coach. And in the fourth spot are community and religious leaders.

What do you notice about the top groups on the list? You should notice that they're the people you know well and who know you well. They're the leaders you are closest to and who are closest to you. They're the ones with whom you have the most intimate contact. And they're the people you meet early in your lives. If you're in a role that brings you into contact with young people on a regular basis—say a parent, teacher, coach, or counselor—keep this observation in mind. Someone is looking to you right now for leadership.

Notice also how few people find leader role models among those who get all the media attention. No more than 4 percent look up to politicians, professional athletes, or entertainers as their leader role models. You can't measure leadership in column inches or Google search results. You can't measure it in bling, entourages, or gold medals. You can't measure it in fame or fortune. You measure it by the actions people you know take that cause you to look to them for guidance along the important journeys in your life.

Leader role models are local. You find them close to where you live and work.

## YOU ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT LEADER

You also definitely find leader role models “close to home” in your organization. The media, and many leadership gurus, focus a lot of attention on people at the top

of organizations—founders, CEOs, generals, presidents, and the like. They make it seem as if these top dogs are the only ones responsible for everything that’s great, and everything that’s lousy, about organizations. It’s a subtle thing, but it perpetuates the trickle-down theory of leadership: all things start at the top and trickle down to the bottom. But, when you actually look at the data, you see a very different picture.

The leader who has the most impact on your day-to-day behavior is, in fact, not the CEO, the COO, the CFO, or any other C—unless, of course, you report directly to that person. The leader who has the most influence over your desire to stay or leave, your commitment to the organization’s vision and values, your ethical decisions and actions, your treatment of customers, your ability to do your job well, and the direction of your career, to name but a few outcomes, is your most immediate manager.

We’ve been tracking the impact leaders have on their constituents and the organization for many years. As we’ve already mentioned, we’ve analyzed data from well over a million respondents, and hundreds of other researchers have used our model and the *Leadership Practices Inventory*<sup>6</sup> to gather data from thousands more. The findings from all these studies point to one very clear conclusion: Managers, volunteers, pastors, government administrators, military officers, teachers, school principals, students, and other leaders who use The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership<sup>®</sup> are seen more frequently by others as better leaders.

For example, they:

- More successfully meet job-related demands
- More effectively represent their units to upper management
- Create higher-performing teams
- Increase sales and customer satisfaction levels
- Foster renewed loyalty and greater organizational commitment
- Increase motivation and the willingness to work hard
- Facilitate high patient satisfaction scores and meet family member needs
- Promote high degrees of involvement and engagement in schools
- Enlarge the size of their congregations
- Expand fundraising results and gift-giving levels
- Extend the range of their agencies' services
- Reduce absenteeism, turnover, and dropout rates
- Positively influence recruitment rates
- Earn higher scores on measures of leader credibility

Additionally, people working with leaders who demonstrate The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership<sup>®</sup> are significantly more satisfied with the actions and strategies of their leaders; they feel more committed, excited, energized, influential, and powerful; and they are more productive. In other words, the more you engage in the practices of exemplary leadership, the more likely it is that you'll have a positive influence on others in the organization.

All this means that, if you're a manager, to your direct reports *you* are the most important leader in the organization. You have much more impact than your CEO on your direct reports' day-to-day performance. And, if that's the case, isn't it your responsibility to be the best leader you can be? You are accountable for the leadership you demonstrate.

### THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP®

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership is the model of best-practices leadership that emerged from our research.<sup>7</sup> These five "practices" (not "laws" or "principles") are

1. Model the Way
2. Inspire a Shared Vision
3. Challenge the Process
4. Enable Others to Act
5. Encourage the Heart

And even if you are not in a management position, there is really no escape. No matter what your position is, you have to take responsibility for the quality of leadership people experience. No one made Melissa Poe the leader. She took personal responsibility for doing something about a serious problem she recognized and started leading. No one can make you a leader, either. You have to take that first step for yourself. You have to be willing to take actions that others will want to follow.

After all, if you aren't willing to follow yourself, why would anyone else want to?

Also keep in mind that you have the chance to truly change a life. As the author Marianne Williamson has written:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. . . . Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. . . . And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.<sup>8</sup>

You have the chance to make the world a better place as a result of what you do. What could be more rewarding than that?

---

**The Truth Is That You Make a Difference.** Somewhere, sometime, the leader within you may get the call to step forward—for the school, the congregation, the community, the agency, the company, the union, or the family. By believing in yourself and in your capacity to lead, you open yourself to hearing the call. You open yourself to making a difference in the world.