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# What Is Effective Leadership?

Sweet are the uses of adversity.

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*



If you want to become an effective leader, what, specifically, should you do to make that happen?

Hundreds of leadership books purport to answer this question today. Just walk into any bookstore. Broadly, the research, thinking, and writing about leadership can be divided into two camps. One camp holds that leadership is all about behavior and that if you want to excel, you should learn and replicate the key behaviors of good leaders. Many companies pursue this view by developing competency models and then rigorously assessing and training their leaders accordingly. The other camp holds that leadership is all about character, values, and authenticity, and companies that adhere to this view focus on transmitting company values and orienting leaders to the right way to do things.

Both approaches are valid—and incomplete. Most leadership development efforts that revolve around *either* character *or* behavior are only sporadically effective because of an inherent problem. Leaders emerge from training emboldened with new ideas and ways of doing things but then re-enter a company culture that has not been modified. They find it difficult to sustain their leadership effectiveness, failing to carry over their success from the learning context to the leadership context.

Consider that in recent years the leadership development

industry has exploded, yet just about every organization complains about a leadership shortage. With the increase in training programs and knowledge about this subject, logic dictates that we should be doing a better job of meeting the organizational demand for talent. In fact, most organizations bemoan the dearth of "ready now" leaders with maturity, judgment, and skill.

What's missing?

Over the years, we've taught, coached, and counseled hundreds of senior executives in Fortune 200 companies throughout the world. Leaders who do not succeed tend to be people who lack self-awareness. Daniel Goleman has made this basic truth clear by describing the importance of emotional intelligence as an important component of effective leadership. Ineffective leaders don't understand their own motivations or acknowledge their weaknesses; they don't engage in reflection, especially when they fail and are unwilling to assume accountability. As smart and skilled as these people may be, they don't really know themselves, and this lack of self-knowledge derails them, especially when they face new leadership challenges.

High-performing leaders, however, are aware of their strengths *and* their weaknesses; they talk and think about their limitations and failures and try to learn from them. They see themselves as continuously learning, adapting, and responding to both positive and negative circumstances. Most important, they are highly conscious of their feelings and behaviors as they move through life, including personal and professional passages: losing a job, being promoted, changing companies, mourning the death of a loved one, dealing with a divorce, and so on.

These passages have an impact on leaders, just as they do on all of us. If you go through them with your eyes—and your mind—closed, you diminish your own development. If you go through them consciously and are open to the lessons they hold, you dramatically increase the odds of being a consistently effective leader.

## Ineffective Leadership Development

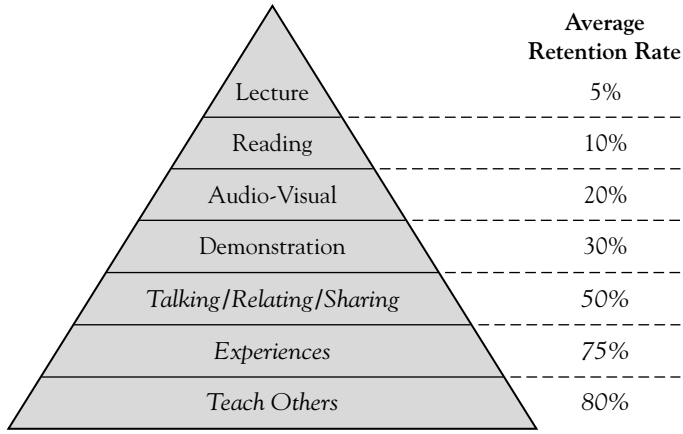
Most organizations, of course, don't look at leadership development from the perspective of these passages. Because of intense competition and the need to build a pipeline of leadership talent, many companies have recently begun to recognize the value of coaching and of conducting 360-degree assessments, as well as other self-awareness-building tools. But companies are still intensely results-driven. Leadership development tends to focus on outcomes, behaviors, competencies, cases, and skills. The reality of leadership is denied, including its self-questioning, its self-doubt, even its vulnerability. Every day, we encounter messages equating strong leadership with certainty, firmness, and the absence of self-reflection.

Explicitly or implicitly, most companies discourage people from talking about their problems or seeking help as they navigate some of the most important circumstances that affect their lives as individuals and as leaders. People may talk to their boss or coworker about the demands of work, company politics, conflict, unmet expectations, or inadequate performance. Or they may discuss specific issues that were pointed out during a performance review. But the discussions usually stay focused on action rather than feeling—on how they can solve the problem rather than face the underlying issues with which they're wrestling.

It also seems counterintuitive to confess what they see as their failings to a boss or mentor. For instance, suppose Janet is a top talent recently recruited by her boss from another company. How easily does Janet tell the person who has invested a considerable amount of the company's money and his own reputation in her that she is struggling with a new corporate culture and its policies? Figure 1.1 represents a "learning pyramid" (how people learn in an organization) graphically.

Similarly, in the senior ranks of most large companies today, discussion of significant personal experience remains a taboo. People experience all types of traumas in their lives that shape their outlook as well as their character and commitment. And they are ex-

Figure 1.1. The Learning Pyramid.




*Source:* Jeanne Meister, *Corporate Universities*.

pected to suppress discussion of these events at work. Only through coaching senior executives have we discovered how significant these personal passages can be and how much they affect, actually even shape, leadership behavior. Men especially feel as if they must tough it out and not allow trouble at home to spill over into their work. The result is that people sit on their feelings and separate their leadership role from their private self. Invariably, this chasm is projected into the work environment, creating a perception of inauthenticity and even distrust. For instance, many executives who go through a divorce deal with their pain and anger by resolving to work harder, travel more frequently, demand more from others, and take umbrage at perceived slights or criticism.

Working through the significant passages of life and career requires time and space for reflection, and companies generally don't allow people this time and space. In most companies today, people aren't allowed sabbaticals; they aren't given the opportunity to take a step back and gain perspective. They simply don't have a chance to think deeply about who they are and what they're doing. Consequently, they persevere through these passages oblivious to

their impact. If they fail at work, they deny culpability for the failure. If they feel terribly sad, they force themselves to be relentlessly upbeat, optimistic, and confident.

Although this may look like effective leadership, it comes with significant costs. When leaders aren't in touch with who they are and what they feel, they are ineffective as leaders. They do not convey passion, power, or persuasion. They may reject feedback, fail to see the negative consequences of their actions, respond poorly to stress, or miss important relationship signals from others. And more often than not, all this gets taken out on their organizations. Perhaps most significantly, they don't deal well with change. Only when people know themselves, acknowledge their experiences and feelings, and confront their humanity do they demonstrate resilience and the capacity to adapt.

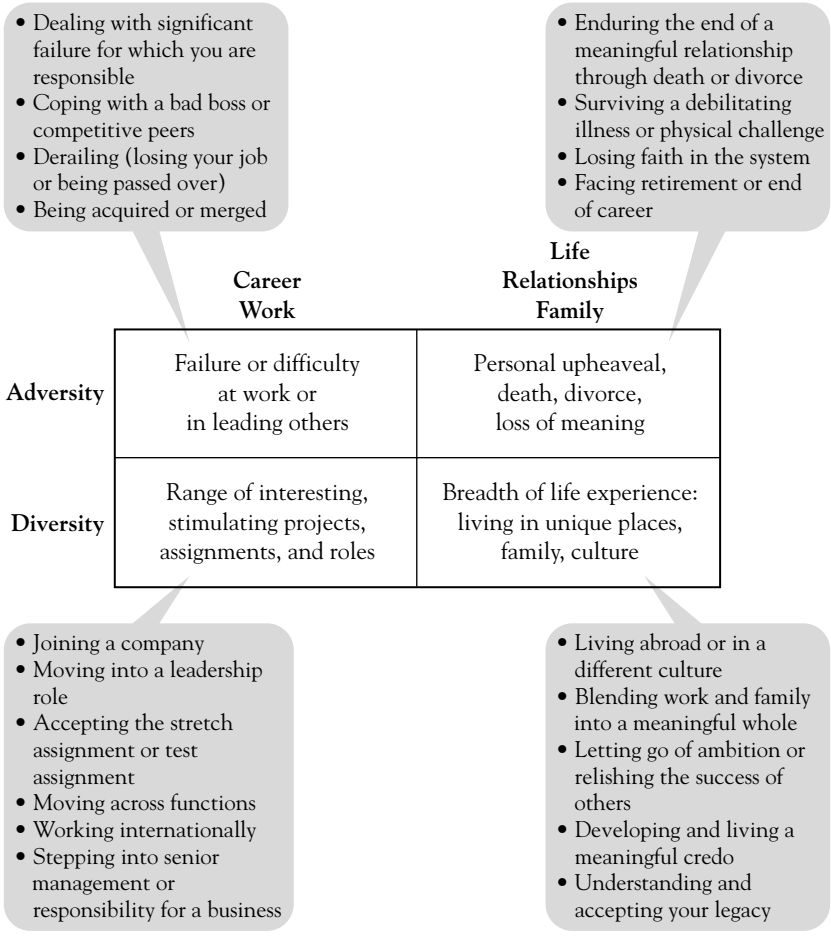
## Leadership Development That Includes Learning from Passages

The good news is that the passages can serve as a career roadmap. If you're aware of what the passages are and how to go through them, you'll learn and grow from each experience. And this constitutes effective leadership development. To understand how this leadership learning and growth takes place, let's look at a 2 × 2 matrix (Figure 1.2) that puts it in perspective.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the matrix shows that there's more to leadership development than taking on a variety of work challenges. Although work diversity is one quadrant of the matrix, the other three are equally important. Some companies today are beginning to acknowledge that failure is a powerful teacher. The best leaders experience job and career setbacks and learn from them; they grieve and integrate the lessons learned from personal failures and tragedies, and they make an effort to live a life filled with a wide range of people, places, and events.

The combination of diversity and adversity, cross-hatched with personal and professional experiences, drives leadership learning

Figure 1.2. Leadership Learning.



and growth. More specifically, it's a leader's willingness to reflect, face into, and talk about what he's going through that facilitates his development. Unfortunately, many companies don't encourage reflection, conversation, and openness. The personal side of the matrix is generally ignored, and job adversity, especially any type of failure, is viewed with disapproval. In succession-planning discussions or promotion decisions, failure, setbacks, and reversals are entered on the negative side of the ledger. And yet good leaders fail frequently. Although some of these failures are public and spectacular, such as a CEO missing the analyst projections for three quarters in row, many are private and partial. It's not unusual for someone to do well with one aspect of an assignment and not so well with another. For example, leaders may succeed in mastering the technical or financial aspects of their job but fail to develop or engage people.

We have learned from coaching many senior leaders that some individuals are often continuously promoted; they show outward evidence of success but feel like failures inside. They don't believe they deserve success because of their perceived inadequacies or self-criticism. And in every organization, you'll find leaders who are very successful professionally and very miserable personally, and the gap between their two lives is gradually eroding their spirit.

At times of adversity, people experience teachable moments. These are windows for learning, for making quantum leaps in emotional intelligence. The individual who enjoys one success after another may become very proficient at what she does but will never grow much as a leader. The person who has some adversity mixed with the success, however, will gain insights that translate eventually into effectiveness.

When you struggle with a stretch assignment, for instance, you have the chance to analyze what's behind this struggle. Perhaps you're not prepared to handle a task that calls for you to function in an ambiguous environment. Maybe you're finding that you're missing a skill that's necessary for the assignment. If you reflect and talk

about the situation and are open to revealing where you're coming up short, you'll acquire self-knowledge that will serve you well in the future. You'll work at functioning more effectively amid ambiguity or at acquiring the missing skill, and the next time you need it, you'll either have it or you'll realize that you need to find someone else to help you.

Although everyone experiences adversity and diversity in unique ways, the general nature of these experiences can be predicted and prepared for. When you know the passages you will encounter, you're better able to maximize their value as learning tools. As you may have noticed when looking at the list of passages, they're organized according to the four quadrants of the matrix: (1) diversity of work experiences, (2) work adversity, (3) diversity of life experiences, and (4) life adversity. To give you a sense of how these passages can benefit a leader, let's look at the experience of one fast-track executive who was derailed by someone he considered a bad boss.

## A Bad Boss as Potential Derailer

Phil had "star" written all over him from the time he graduated with honors from a top MBA program. Handsome, smart, charismatic, and the son of a business school professor to boot, Phil joined a major packaged-goods firm after graduating and quickly was given increasing amounts of responsibility and a series of promotions. Not only did he meet or exceed expectations in his first three positions but he was fortunate to have the types of bosses who came from backgrounds similar to his and with whom he quickly established good relationships.

Then Phil was transferred to a new group, and this time his boss was Tony, a tough guy who had never received an advanced degree. Tony had achieved his position in the company through hard work and hard-won expertise; he was street smart and knew how to deal with organizational politics. From the moment Tony set eyes on

Phil, he seemed to have it in for him, or at least that was Phil's perception. He threw verbal jabs at Phil whenever he cited a famous business guru or theory as justification for an action. Tony told Phil that he'd reached a rung on the ladder where his education and charm didn't mean anything. Even worse, he consistently rejected Phil's ideas and kept him off teams "where the real action was." He told Phil he had a lot to learn before he could play with the tough competition.

Phil was furious and immediately convinced himself that Tony had it in for him because he was jealous of Phil's privileged background. When Tony would tell him what he had done wrong—and he'd usually tell him bluntly and coarsely—Phil tuned out. He was certain that Tony had nothing of value to pass on and that sooner or later he'd find another position far away from Tony.

Phil was right, at least in the sense that he would be able to find another job. He took an offer from one of his company's competitors, but he quickly ran into problems with a boss who was a woman. Phil told friends that her unwillingness to give him a promotion he deserved was based on her hatred of all men. After a few months, he went over his new boss's head and was able to finagle a transfer to another unit. Though he got along all right with his new boss, his performance was mediocre, and he seemed unable to recapture his old star quality.

Phil's problem was that he was oblivious to the passage of "dealing with a bad boss." Whether Tony actually was a bad boss is beside the point. Phil simply didn't use his problems with Tony for reflection and conversation and for being open about his own weaknesses. If he had, he might have realized that he had a problem dealing with people from different backgrounds, that he was overly reliant on his charm and education, and that he didn't put in the time and effort necessary to do certain assignments well. If he had become more conscious of his shortcomings, he might have been better prepared to deal with them when they surfaced in the future.

## A Test of Learning from Passages

The odds are that you've gone through at least a few of the thirteen passages we outline. We would like you to consider *how* you traversed a passage. Here is a list of the passages:

- Joining a company
- Moving into a leadership role
- Accepting the stretch assignment
- Assuming responsibility for a business
- Dealing with significant failure for which you are responsible
- Coping with a bad boss and competitive peers
- Losing your job or being passed over for promotion
- Being part of an acquisition or merger
- Living in a different country or culture
- Finding a meaningful balance between work and family
- Letting go of ambition
- Facing personal upheaval
- Losing faith in the system

Choose one passage from this list that you've gone through. Ideally, pick one that you experienced relatively recently and that had a significant impact on your personal or professional life. Based on this particular passage, answer the following questions:

When you were going through this experience, did you have much time to step away from it and think long and hard about what was occurring?

After the event that constitutes the passage had ended, did you reflect on what had taken place? Did you put this event into the larger context of your life (work or

personal) and attempt to figure out its meaning in the greater scheme of things?

Did you engage at least one other person in conversation about this passage? Was this conversation confined to the problem and possible solutions (what happened and what you might do about it), or did you talk about deeper issues: how it made you feel, your fears, your expectations?

If the event had an adverse consequence, did you admit to yourself or others how you may have failed or come up short?

Is there anything you learned from this passage? Motivate you to reassess certain assumptions? Make you aware of a vulnerability? Motivate you to acquire a specific knowledge or skill? Prepare you to handle a similar passage better in the future?

If you're like most people, you answered no to at least some of these questions. Perhaps, like Phil, you became defensive when you failed and blamed your problems on others as you went through the passage. Perhaps you simply rushed through it, anxious to get it behind you and avoid dealing with the issues it raised. Most of us lack the time, energy, and inclination to go through these passages consciously and deeply. Consider, though, that the benefit of doing so is greater leadership effectiveness.

When we think about being more effective as a leader, we generally don't think about developing greater self-awareness or emotional intelligence. Instead, we think in classic terms about what makes an effective leader. We believe we need to acquire certain skills—decision making, strategizing, and so on—to become a strong leader. Or we are convinced that winning is key and that if we just become better at getting things done and achieving results, we'll increase our effectiveness. Or we work at our people skills, recognizing that leadership is increasingly about building strong relationships.

All of this is fine, except that these actions provide only incremental gains in leadership effectiveness. Ultimately, the way we use our skills, obtain results, or establish relationships is contingent on our internal awareness of who we are. If we're blind to our weak spots, they're bound to trip us up. We may be a great relationship builder under ideal circumstances, but under stress our weaknesses surface and we destroy a critical relationship. Because we're not aware, we don't learn from experience, especially the critical passage experiences.

This brings up the key question: How do the passages help us learn what we need to know to become effective leaders? We hope that this book will allow you to answer that question successfully.