# Chapter 1

# Hacking the Leadership Gap

*The plausibility of impossibility only becomes*
*a probability in the absence of leadership.*

## Overview—The Commoditization of Leadership

Whether you believe leadership has evolved or devolved over time, there is no disputing the practice of leadership has become a contentious topic steeped in ethereal, ambiguous rhetoric. Everyone seems to have an opinion of what constitutes good leadership, but if good leadership is so easy to define and identify, why then does it seem so hard to come by?

Society has essentially commoditized leadership resulting in a leadership bubble of sorts. Because leadership has become the latest version of an entitlement program, too many unqualified leaders have been allowed to enter the ranks.

This is not just a business problem—it's a global leadership problem. The media is littered with daily examples of those placed in positions of leadership who failed to lead. Leaders are often selected, promoted, and retained on entirely the wrong basis. When leadership is perceived as little more than a title granting access to a platform for personal gain, rather than a privilege resulting in an opportunity to serve, we'll continue to find ourselves in a crisis of leadership.

Those of you familiar with my work know I'm a dyed in the wool leadership guy. . . . I believe all things begin and end with leadership. In fact, I hold this thesis so dear, I've said for years "businesses don't fail, projects don't fail, and products don't fail—leaders fail."

With principled, effective leadership, all things are possible. It's only when optics become more important than ethics, when profit becomes more important than purpose, when process becomes more important than people, and when politics becomes more important than doing the right thing, that individuals and organizations lose their direction. Sadly, this is where much of the world finds itself today. The good news is by hacking current leadership frameworks and dynamics we can find our way back to true north.

The best leaders understand leadership is the key to unlocking and realizing limitless potential. I want you to think about leadership like this—the only boarders to leadership are those which are self-imposed. The only limits on your personal, team, or organizational leadership are the ones you submit to.

So, you have a choice—you can limit your worldview, or you can expand it—you can embrace the status quo, or you can shatter it—you can follow *best* practices, or you can lead innovation around them to identify *next* practices. Real leaders don't limit themselves, but more importantly they refuse to limit those they lead.

All truly great leaders I've had the opportunity to work with have had one thing in common—they have a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. They've learned to check their ego, enhance their level of self-awareness, and understand how others perceive them. They are clear thinkers who understand their role and are prepared to act accordingly.

This is a foundational chapter—one that sets the tone you can build upon chapter by chapter as you move forward. Therefore, the balance of this chapter will offer some insights into how you can hack away at the

self-rationalizations and justifications keeping you from reaching your leadership potential.

## The Leadership Gap Defined

Those who become what they do not understand will not like the outcome. It's imperative you define yourself on both an aspirational and practical level as a leader in order to lead well. Leadership isn't just a role or a title—it's a choice. The best leaders choose to be better, they choose to be different—they choose to lead well. The seminal question you must ask yourself as a leader is why should anyone be led by you?

Think about it like this—aside from having a job, how are people better off for being led by you? In order to consistently receive the right answer to the aforementioned question, a leader must first gain an understanding of the following three critical leadership gaps:

1. **The Development Gap:** This refers to the gap between how you assess your current leadership ability and your true potential as a leader. An accurate understanding of this gap indicates whether you see leadership as a destination or as a continuum. It will determine whether you grow and develop your leadership skills, or whether you will follow the path of least resistance and rest upon your laurels. Keep this in mind—it is impossible for a leader who is not growing and developing to lead a growing and developing enterprise.

2. **The Influence Gap:** While influence can be generated in all directions, for purposes of this discussion I'm referring to the gap between your self-assessment and the assessment of your leadership ability by your peers. Your understanding of this gap, and willingness to do something about it, will determine your ability to build a cohesive team. Leaders who don't have the trust and respect of their team won't be able to generate the influence necessary to perform at the expected levels.

3. **The Reality Gap:** This refers to the difference between how you view yourself and how those you lead feel about you. A leader who loses the faith and confidence of their workforce won't be able to attract and retain talent, will have a culture on life support, and sub-par performance that ensures only one thing—a limited shelf life.

Let's stop right here and do a quick gut check. I want you to rate yourself as a leader on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 representing the worst in leadership and 10 being the best in leadership. I don't want you to rate your leadership potential, but rather how you are currently performing as a leader. This is a risk-free evaluation, as nobody will see your score but you; do this now and write the number here ___.

Here's what we know to be true based upon the empirical evidence gleaned from conducting thousands of interviews with senior executives. Regardless of your position/title, you likely rated yourself between a 6 and an 8. Am I right? The reality is regardless of how transparent you tried to be, 90+ percent of all people in leadership positions won't rate themselves below a 6. Similarly, 90+ percent of people in leadership positions won't rate themselves higher than an 8.

While this first set of data might not shock you, here's something else we know about leadership self-evaluations—leaders consistently overrate themselves. How do we know this? Because we have also surveyed thousands of subordinates and peers, as well as those whom the leaders report to. This next set of data will shock you.

When we ask those who work for and with you to rate you on the same scale with which you conducted your self-assessment, they rate you on average 200 basis points lower than you rate yourself—that's right, two full percentage points lower. So, if you rated yourself an 8 your co-workers likely rate you a 6. If you rated yourself a 6, then they likely rated you a 4. How does that make you feel?

The difference between your self-assessment score and how others rate you is what I refer to as the leadership gap. Whether the leadership gap is perception or reality doesn't really matter—it's nonetheless the gap all leaders must learn to hack.

Put yourself in the shoes of those who rated you—how impassioned and motivated would you be to awaken each morning to go to work for a leader who rates somewhere between a 4 and 6?

Where leadership always runs amok is when hubris overshadows humility, and self-serving motives take the place of service beyond self. Leadership is not about the power and the accolades bestowed upon the leader; it's about the betterment of those whom the leader serves. At its essence, leadership is about people. At its core, leadership is about

improving the status quo, inspiring positive change, and challenging conventional thinking.

As long as positional and philosophical arguments are more important than forward progress, as long as being right is esteemed above being vulnerable and open to new thought, as long as ego is elevated above empathy and compassion, as long as rhetoric holds more value than performance, and as long as we tolerate these things as acceptable behavior we will all suffer at the hands of poor leadership.

I think most of us understand at a high level that companies live and die by the quality of their leadership—but how many of you really internalize this deep down at a personal level? If you're ready to dig deep and get serious about leadership, the first thing to understand is how control limits your ability to lead.

## Hacking the Control Gap

The most common mistake I see leaders make is to attempt to lead through control. As counterintuitive as it might seem, in order to gain influence you must surrender control. The reality is you'll rarely encounter the words *leadership* and *surrender* used together in complementary fashion. Society has labeled surrender as a sign of leadership weakness, when in fact it can be among the greatest of leadership strengths. Leaders who fail to learn how to hack the control gap fail to lead up to their potential.

Let me be clear, I'm not encouraging giving in or giving up—I am suggesting you learn the ever so subtle art of letting go. Leaders simply operate at their best when they understand their ability to influence is much more fruitful than their ability to control. Here's the thing—the purpose of leadership is not to shine the spotlight on yourself, but to unlock the potential of others so they can in turn shine the spotlight on countless more. Control is about power—not leadership. Surrender allows leaders to stop impeding themselves and focus on adding value to those whom they serve.

If you're still not convinced the art of leadership is learning that the focus point should be on surrender not control, consider this: Control restricts potential, limits initiative, and inhibits talent. Surrender

fosters collaboration, encourages innovation, and enables possibility. Controlling leaders create bottlenecks rather than increase throughput. They signal a lack of trust and confidence and often come across as insensitive if not arrogant. When you experience weak teams, micro-management, frequent turf wars, high stress, operational strain, and a culture of fear, you are experiencing what control has to offer—not very attractive is it?

Surrender allows the savvy leader to serve, but control demands that the egocentric leader be served. Surrender allows leadership to scale and a culture of leadership to be established. Surrender prefers loose collaborative networks to rigid hierarchical structures allowing information to be more readily shared and distributed. Leaders who understand surrender think community, ecosystem, and culture—not org chart. Surrender is what not only allows the dots to be connected, but it's what allows the dots to be multiplied. Controlling leaders oper-ate in a world of addition and subtraction, while the calculus of a leader who understands surrender is built on exponential multiplication.

I have found those who embrace control are simply attempting to consolidate power, while those who practice surrender are facilitating the distribution of authority. When what you seek is to build into oth-ers more than glorifying self, you have developed a level of leadership maturity that values surrender over control. Surrender is the mind-set that creates the desire for leaders to give credit rather than take it, to prefer hearing over being heard, to dialogue instead of monologue, to have an open mind over a closed mind, to value unlearning as much as learning. Control messages selfishness, while surrender conveys self-lessness—which is more important to you?

Keep this in mind—we all surrender, but not all surrender is hon-orable. Some surrender to their ego, to the wrong priorities, or to other distractive habits. Others surrender to the positive realization that they are not the center of the universe—they surrender to something beyond themselves in order to accomplish more for others. Bottom line—what you do or don't surrender to will define you. Assuming you surrender to the right things, surrender is not a sign of leadership weakness, but is perhaps the ultimate sign of leadership confidence. I'll leave you with this quote from William Booth: "The greatness of a man's power is the measure of his surrender."

Once you recognize where you stand with regard to the leadership gap and you get past limiting control issues, it's time to identify your blind spots. This requires deep introspection and a heightened sense of self-awareness.

## The Awareness Gap—Finding the Blind Spots

Leader Beware—ignorant bliss, no matter how enjoyable, is still ignorant. If you're in a position of leadership and don't feel you have any blind spots, you're either very naïve or very arrogant. All leaders have blind spots—the question is what are they doing about them? The reality is most leaders invest so much time assessing the cultural and functional dynamics of their organizations that they often forget the importance of critically assessing themselves—big mistake.

I've never understood leaders who make heavy investments in personal and professional development early in their careers, who then go on to make only minimal investments in learning once they have reached the C-suite. Learning and development are lifelong endeavors.

The learning journey doesn't come to an end just because you reach a certain station in life—or at least it shouldn't. It has consistently been my experience that leaders who are not growing simply cannot lead growing organizations. Moreover, leaders who fail to continue developing will always be replaced by those who do. A leader who fails to understand the value of self-awareness fails to understand their true potential as a leader.

The further up the ladder leaders climb, the more they must be on top of their game as they have the broadest sphere of influence, the largest ability to impact a business, and they also now have the most at risk. It is at this place leaders should make the heaviest investment in refining their game, because increased performance will pay the biggest dividends. Let me be as clear as I can—the more responsibility leaders have, the bigger their obligation to be on the forward edge of learning, growth, and development.

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates had a few guiding principles that today's leaders would do well to adopt: Socrates said, "Know Thyself" and "An unexamined life is not worth living." Those leaders

who actively pursue gaining a better understanding of themselves will not only reduce their number of blind spots, but they'll also find developing a sense of awareness is the key to increasing emotional intelligence. The better you know yourself, the more effective you'll be, and the better you'll relate to others.

To build on the hacks covered thus far, it will be important to evolve your critical thinking. This is best done through the refining lens of extreme clarity.

## The Key to Clarity—White Space

Here's something you may not want to hear, but you should definitely take to heart; if you're having difficulty ordering your world, it's nobody's fault but yours. I don't care how busy you are, but I do care about what you accomplish—the former doesn't always lead to the latter. Busy leaders are a dime a dozen, but highly productive leaders are not so common. One of the easiest things for leaders to do is to bite off more than they can chew. All successful leaders are accomplished at hacking their schedule to create more time for clear thought.

*Fact*: Bright, talented executives with a bias to action will often take on more than they should. These leaders don't understand the value of white space. The reality is maximizing results and creating a certainty of execution is all about focus, focus, and more focus. Here's the thing—it's difficult to focus in the middle of chaos. One of the hardest things for leaders to do is to learn to create white space. The best leaders are those who understand the most productive things often happen during intentional periods of isolation used for self-reflection, introspection, and the rigor of critical thought.

See if you can think of anyone you know who resembles the following description. I recently had the chance to work with a leader who is as bright and talented as they come. That said, he had confused being busy with being productive. He was in back-to-back-to-back meetings from the time he arrived at the office until after 5:00 P.M. He didn't have any time to think much less do his own work. In fact, the working and thinking all took place after he arrived at home in the evening. This leader was working 70- hour weeks, falling behind, suffering from fatigue, and was becoming at risk.

Everyone in the company wanted a piece of this leader, but they were in effect sucking the leader dry. The leader was complicit to their own demise by not understanding the importance of maintaining adequate white space, as well as maintaining a personal life. If you're honest, more than a few people in your organization likely fit this pro-file—it may even be you.

While the mind of a leader may be most comfortable being ori-ented toward the future, he/she can only act in the here and now. The knowledge and skills required to build mastery can only be acquired when we focus on what we're currently doing. This is the definition of presence, and it is only when we operate in the present that real cre-ativity, growth, and innovation occur.

The problem with being present is many leaders confuse this with having to do everything themselves. Have you ever interacted with someone who deals with silence by jumping in and filling the conversa-tional void? This same thing occurs with executives who attempt to fill every open slot on the calendar with activity—this is a huge mistake.

All good leaders have matured to understand they can be fully engaged and present and yet still be alone. Smart leaders don't fill their calendars with useless activities. They strategically plan for white space allowing them to focus on highest and best use endeavors. Leading doesn't always mean doing. In fact, most often times it means pulling back and creating white space so that others can lead. This is true lead-ership that can be scaled.

Is your rubber band stretched so tight it's about to snap? Efficiency and productivity are not found working at or even near capacity. Rather entering the productivity zone is found working at about 60 percent to 70 percent of capacity. Operating in excess of that threshold will cause increased stress, lack of attention to detail, and errant deci-sion making.

The old "what if I only had 'X' number of hours to work in a week, what would I focus on?" exercise is a good one. In fact, if you're reading this text, just stop right now and benchmark your activity against your reflective thoughts: Is what you're doing, in alignment with your true priorities, or have you been sucked down into the weeds?

It is important for executives to learn to apply focused leverage to a limited number of highest and best use activities rather than to

continually shift gears between multiple initiatives. Resist the temptation to just advance a broad number of disparate initiatives, and alternatively focus your efforts on the completion of a few high impact objectives.

The simple reality is that if you continue to add new responsibilities to an already full plate, all of your obligations will suffer as a result. Face current challenges *head-on* by keeping your *head down* and applying focused leverage to the task at hand. Leaders who operate without margins usually hit the wall they are most desperate to avoid.

Have you noticed how some leaders are frenzied, stressed, and always playing from behind, while others are eerily clam and always appear to be a few steps ahead? It's been my experience that leaders who fall into the latter category make great use of their thought life, while those in the former category seem to forgo their alone time in lieu of being busy. Savvy leaders crave white space, whereas unseasoned leaders feel uncomfortable with open time.

One thing that can be a difficult lesson to learn is that not all engagement is necessary or productive. Leadership and engagement go hand in hand, but only when engagement happens by design rather than by default. Don't get me wrong, good things can happen with spontaneous engagement, but if you're engaging with others without intent and purpose, it likely serves as a distraction for all parties. Don't interfere with your team just because you don't understand how to use your time wisely. If you do, you'll become an annoyance known for not respecting others—this is not leadership.

I have found the best leaders are harder on themselves than anyone else could ever be. In fact, this is so much the case that the best leaders constantly self-assess and are relentless in challenging themselves. They relish their solitude because it gives them the ability to be alone with their thoughts, to challenge their logic, to refine their theories, and to test the boundaries of their intellect. It's during these quiet moments that leaders willing to be honest with themselves will examine their own flaws and frailties. They are forever in search of new ways of dealing with old problems.

The beauty of leveraging white space is it helps you avoid falling into the all too common leadership rut. It's now time to focus on hacking the status quo.

## Hacking the Status Quo

Leaders who are bored, in a rut, or otherwise find themselves anesthetized by the routine have a huge problem—*they are not leading*. Leadership is a game for the mentally agile, not the brain dead. Sound harsh? It's meant to. While most of the world has succumbed to a static life imprisoned by the limitations of their own mind, real leaders are always looking beyond *what is*, thinking about the possibilities of *what if*, and acting to ensure *what's next*.

Why then do so many leaders complain about being in a rut? They get comfortable playing things safely, they rest on their laurels, they stop investing in personal growth and development, and they settle, they quit and stay—they become a leader in title only.

At one time or another we all experience the signs of boredom. Here's the thing—boredom is a state of mind. The difference between real leaders, and leaders in title only, is what they do when the creative juices begin to dwindle. Feigned leaders accept the status quo, and real leaders see the signs of boredom as the precursor to needed change.

For most people, the simple truth is excuses come easier than solutions—but who said leadership was easy? Leadership is about acclimation and reacclimation, improvising and adapting, learning and unlearning—leadership is about change.

My observations and experiences over the years have led me to a very simple conclusion: I have yet to see anyone improve their status by maintaining the status quo. If you're going to get comfortable with anything as a leader, I would suggest it be change. Change is a leader's best friend, and the one thing that will propel you forward.

Don't make excuses—make changes. Saying you don't have time for "*X*" is just code for "*X*" isn't important to me. Saying you don't have the resources needed for change is just an admission you're not very resourceful. Leadership has little to do with resources, but everything to do with resourcefulness. If you're stuck in a leadership rut, use the following five hacks to help you find your path back to real leadership:

1. **Go Break Something:** Need to reinvigorate a stale mind or a less than thriving enterprise? Try changing the corporate landscape by shifting existing roles and responsibilities, or by bringing

in fresh talent from the outside. If you want to drive innovation, lead change, and create growth, stir the pot—go break something. Slaughter a few sacred cows, challenge conventional wisdom, break a paradigm, and inject a little chaos into your static environment. Old isn't necessarily wrong, but likewise, it's not necessarily right either. Overlay a new business model on top of the existing one, and look for ways to create new advantages and make needed improvements. Reengineer a *best* practice into a *next* practice. Ask yourself this question: Is the most tenured person in a particular position, the best person for the position? If not, make a change. Don't be bored; just implement a little creative destruction.

2. **Recharge Your Brain:** A stagnant thought life is not a sign of healthy leadership. A brain is like any other energy source—it needs to be nourished in order to evolve. Whether you stimulate your brain through basic learning activities like reading, taking classes, or participating in workshops or seminars, or by just giving it some well needed rest, the important thing is to make a concerted effort in this regard. Some of my best thinking comes when I remove myself from the routine of the office and go for a run. Vacations, sabbaticals, and service projects are also quite useful for creating new thinking paradigms. I'm a big proponent of attempting to carve out new neural pathways by subjecting the brain to new and creative ways of thinking. A few of the things I'm doing this year include going cold-turkey on television (a family project), playing one game of chess each day, and studying a new language. Change-up your routine and do things differently and more productively—you'll be glad you did.

3. **Get Some Help:** Leading in isolation is dangerous. The best leaders surround themselves with wise counsel, and make a habit of seeking out sound advice. Start close to home—ask your family for their candid opinion of your shortcomings, and then listen. Those who love you the most will also give you the respect of candor. In addition to seeking guidance from your family, seek out professional advice and counsel by joining a peer group, hiring a coach, creating an advisory board, or finding a new mentor. There are abundant resources available to leaders resourceful enough to seek them out. Don't allow yourself to be held hostage by your pride, ego, arrogance, or ignorance—go get some help.

4. **Have a Vigorous Debate:** Few things kindle the creative fires like a challenging debate. By seeking out dissenting views and differing opinions, you open your mind to new ideas and perspectives. A developed mind is the result of a challenged mind. Smart leaders take their business logic and willingly subject it to brutal assault. In doing so, they often find what they believed to be close to perfect was in fact flawed. Go find the smartest people you can, and ask them to poke holes in your theories and beliefs. There is value in both validation and invalidation. Don't be afraid of being proven wrong—be afraid of thinking you're right when you're not.

5. **Fire Yourself:** In the final analysis, if you can't or won't fix yourself, or you can't or won't allow yourself to be developed by others, then it's time to pass the baton. Both you and your organization deserve more than just a leader in title, and if you cannot perform as leader, then find someone who can. Whether you transition to a co-CEO role, entrepreneur in residence, chairman of the board, consultant, take a sabbatical, or you just resign your position, all concerned parties will be better off by making a move that is likely long overdue.

Now that you're aware, refreshed, have clarity of thought, and have abandoned the status quo, it's time to get prepared.

## Hacking the Preparation Gap

Do you ever find yourself in over your head? If not, I would suggest you don't spend enough time in the water. Creating white space has a dual advantage for leaders—it not only keeps them out of a rut, but it also helps them avoid getting in over their heads.

The truth is all leaders find themselves swimming in rough conditions from time to time. And trust me—it will happen to you. The difference between those who drown and those who become stronger swimmers is little more than a combination of attitude and preparation.

It was T.S. Eliot who said, "If you aren't in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?" With all due respect to Mr. Eliot, it's one thing to push past comfort zones and test your capabilities, but it's quite another thing to survive doing so. Here's the thing—good leaders take risks, but great leaders are prepared for the risks they take.

Being in over your head can lead to career-defining moments (good or bad). When leaders push personal, team, or organization boundaries one of two things is likely to happen: They'll either exceed all expectations or fall short of them. The difference between success and failure isn't found in risk taking alone, but in the planning and execution surrounding the taking of the risk. There's truth in the old military saying that "prior proper planning prevents poor performance."

I remember a time I went surfing in the frigid waters of the Pacific Northwest with my son-in-law. It was the first time I'd climbed on a surfboard in more than 30 years. I crammed myself into the wetsuit (not a pretty sight) and paddled out to the waves. The truth is, my son-in-law surfed, and I spent two hours trying not to drown. He was prepared, experienced, and in shape. He challenged himself, and I was just in over my head—literally and figuratively. He had a great time, and I just had a time of it.

My surfing experience was a great reminder that all the positive thinking in the world won't overcome certain practical realities. I don't regret surfing that day, but I do regret not being prepared for it. While I survived the experience, it was pure luck. Not everyone who takes risks without the proper preparation is so lucky. I'm not suggesting leaders shouldn't take risks, but simply that the risks be prudent ones.

The bigger issue for leaders is not the personal risk they take, but the risks they subject others to. While leaders have a responsibility to those they lead not to take unnecessary risks, they likewise have an absolute obligation to seek out and incur necessary risk. Many leaders take risks, but great leaders inculcate the planned execution of necessary risk as a cultural imperative. When calculated risk taking becomes encouraged at all levels of the enterprise it's an indicator of sound leadership and a healthy culture.

My message here is simply this: Rather than fear the rough waters, take the time and effort to prepare your team for them. Then and only then, go in search of the big waves.

Perhaps the most powerful thing about creating white space is that it presents opportunities for others to step in and raise the level of their contributions. When leaders step back and resist the temptation to do everything themselves, their organization is strengthened. When leaders become comfortable being without always doing, collaboration

flourishes, and productivity is enhanced. Whether white space makes you more productive on an individual basis, or you leverage the white space to create operational depth and scale, you're better off with white space than without it.

Earlier in this chapter I encouraged leaders to go break something—to go upend the status quo. I want to share a brief story about a client, who while some may thought might have been in over his head initially, proved to be an absolute game changer as a leader.

My client had just accepted a position as  President of McGraw-Hill Higher Education. He stepped into a company too comfortable with the status quo, even though the industry was in transition. An old economy industry attempting to compete in a digital era. He immediately recognized the need for change—massive, fast, and above all else, smart change.

This push for change wasn't based on an impulsive whim or youthful naiveté, but it was a calculated, courageous act of an insightful leader—he saw it as a matter of survival. He was also right.

In less than 2 years on the job, he not only transformed the company, but he also transformed the entire industry in terms of how publishing is perceived and used. He made massive changes in personnel, positioning, and made big investments into technology, actually coining the phrase "super-adaptive learning."

The leader I've been describing is Brian Kibby. The leader some initially doubted (not me) is now considered a thought leader in higher education, and is responsible for taking a storied brand from industry lagger to industry leader.

Okay, now that we've laid a good foundation, it's time to address a key leadership concept many leaders have lost sight of, trivialize, or worse yet altogether ignore—Purpose.