

## CHAPTER 1

# From Ordinary Career to Leadership Journey

## ***What Separates Leaders from Managers?***

Whether a leader is made or born, whichever you believe, we see in the making of the five leaders featured in this book that they grew and *evolved*, one pivotal decision at a time. Their stories show how five pivotal decisions clearly stand out—from hundreds of other important work decisions they also made—as the ones that determined their journey to leadership. For these leaders, pivot points served as career builders, although they often presented at first as career stoppers. That is the dynamics of pivot points: They can show up as positive or negative events, and pivotal decisions can turn out for better or for worse. They can be catalysts of growth or leave careers to languish. The difference is what this book addresses: What turns a pivot point from being a potential career stopper or career trap into a career builder? How do certain decisions separate leaders from everyone else?

The industry-changing leaders in this book faced all their pivot points by consistently making decisions that unleashed a surprising reserve of leadership potential and produced outcomes exceeding their own dreams. Each decision triggered a quantum leap of learning and growth. By proactively making and executing these decisions, each leader avoided the career trap of daily operational and environmental issues becoming blinders to what truly mattered.

The framework of five pivotal decisions helps us understand the strategies leaders use to keep moving forward. Based on intimate, in-depth interviews and validated by research, this perspective examines more than decision-making skills, process, or style. It shows how certain decisions catapulted these individuals to extraordinary success because they *decided to change the story and hold themselves accountable* for changing the course of events. At other times, they created a pivot point to change the status quo. These were decisions to lead—although the decisions they made were not explicitly about being a leader or jockeying for position. Ultimately, leading is a purposeful decision for making oneself accountable for fulfilling a worthy idea that requires out-of-the-ordinary responsibility and effort.

### **DECISION-MAKING LEADERS, LEADER-MAKING DECISIONS**

At the beginning of this book project, I interviewed a few handpicked leaders. I simply wanted to bring attention to great leaders who don't seek or need the spotlight. I ended up discovering that in all their journeys, a certain pattern existed in which a decision opened up possibilities that stirred their passion. They took on opportunities and challenges that involved skills to master, mistakes to make, and lessons to learn. Embracing this journey paved the way for the next career-defining decision, and that brought yet another new set of opportunities, challenges, and skills to master, mistakes to make, and lessons to learn. Each successive pivot point was not possible without the previous. Each pivotal decision built on the foundation the previous pivotal decisions laid and connected in a trajectory that turned these ordinary people into extraordinary leaders. Although each pivotal experience established leadership, it's the journey that made them great leaders.

All the featured individuals are ambitious, but none started out with the goal to transform industries. Their stories show that incredible achievements and personal growth come out of a decision to change the narrative from the expected course of events. Each success built confidence in exploring options as a better strategy than working within

the confines of the status quo. Many decisions defied conventional wisdom; others put at risk the success they had already attained to achieve what really mattered to them, which perhaps is one of the most difficult pivot points to journey through. In all cases, midcareer turbulence instigated decisions that would propel them to great success they did not know was ahead.

This developmental perspective focuses on the decision to lead conscientiously as distinctly different from decisions motivated by personal gain only. Findings from our survey show that some people, when facing a decision that weighs heavily, focus on what's better for them, whereas others look at what's best for the business and team. Some people see only conventional or comfortable options, whereas others come up with unconventional ones, perhaps outside the comfort zone of an individual, team, or company. And so, some people keep making decisions that do not play a pivotal role but accrue personal benefits. Other people make one or two pivotal decisions and then lose their verve—usually without realizing it. The leaders in this book kept making pivotal decisions to build real economic and social value.

Leaders often cite luck for pivotal successes because they could not take credit for the exact time, place, and nature of those pivot points of opportunity. They know that their real opportunities to break out of the crowd arose from the complex interactions of people and organizations and of marketplaces and social change. In many cases, what catapulted them to success were adversities turned into opportunities. As heavyweight champion boxer Mike Tyson said when asked what he knew about his opponent's fight plan, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." Plans serve a purpose but in boxing or business, the champion is the one who instinctively connects with the spontaneous opportunity.

How these leaders handled pivotal decisions shows us what separates leaders from managers. Although managerial decisions are part of a leader's job, the pivotal decisions create and define the work of leading as distinctly different from the work of managing. By holding themselves accountable for a bold idea that changes the status quo, these leaders had to entrust others to manage all that is involved with business as usual. With each successive pivotal decision, they stood out from their cohort of high achievers; by the fourth or fifth pivotal decision, they were at the top of their game and their industry.

## ARE FIVE PIVOTAL DECISIONS THE EXPERIENCE OF JUST LEADERS OR EVERYONE?

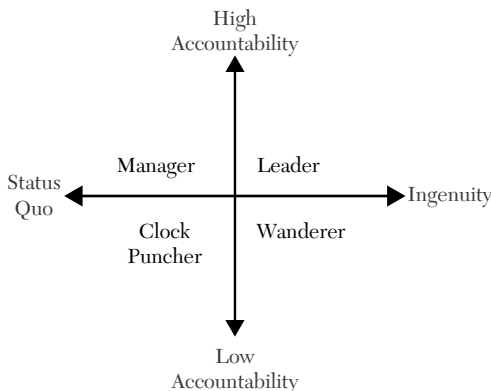
To answer the question of whether this framework of five pivotal decisions is a widely shared experience, I worked with a research expert to conduct a nationwide survey of 500 college-educated adults in professional careers, representative of 16 percent of US adults.

To study the relationship between pivotal decisions and leadership, we needed a new tool for measuring leadership decision making. Pulling from experience working with and learning about leaders, I peeled away all the values attached to leadership that are more descriptive than defining and zeroed in on its two most essential elements: accountability and ingenuity. Effective leaders hold themselves accountable to make something important happen; as part of taking full accountability, they also make others accountable for what was delegated to them. Ingenuity covers all the ideas, solutions, and vision that make up accountabilities.

When using these two variables in a matrix, four quadrants of behaviors emerge; I call these leader, manager, wanderer, and clock puncher. (See Figure 1.1.)

The study tested three hypotheses about leadership:

1. There are five pivotal opportunities to make decisions that determine the course of a career.
2. Both accountability and ingenuity drive leadership behavior.



**FIGURE 1.1 Four Types of Decision-Making Behaviors**

3. When accountability and/or ingenuity fall short, other behavior sets produce outcomes less successful than leadership behaviors.

The study not only validates the pivotal-decisions framework but also shows how the five pivotal decisions can be career builders or career stoppers. In the self-reported perceptions, we see which behaviors produced successful and unsuccessful experiences. Collecting data for the same questions from the supervisors of the respondents would add another layer of analysis. However, this study's purpose is to understand the career experience of the decision maker as both story maker and storyteller.

Specifically, 78 percent (representing 29 million college-educated professionals) in the study have (1) experienced pivot points and (2) made pivotal decisions using the four behavior sets we postulated. Together, the findings, which I explain in detail in Chapter 8, identify the decision points where people need the most help.

As we can expect, men and women can experience pivotal decisions at different times; an obvious difference occurs when women make the decision to let go of, or postpone, the career they had at the time they opted to focus on parenting. Another important factor is that almost everyone in a professional career will encounter some of these pivot points, but not everyone will make an intentional pivotal decision. Some will not recognize the decision point, and others will simply not decide by waiting to see what happens. By the way, that is also a decision. People reporting they haven't had the occasion to make more pivotal decisions commensurate with their years of experience may, in fact, have faced pivot points with passivity—which was a decision but wasn't a pivotal decision.

The evidence strongly suggests that leaders walk the path to greatness by fully engaging with all five pivot points and that leaders make all five pivotal decisions with leadership accountability and vision. Between pivot points, they are human and can wade through times when they behave more like managers, wanderers, or clock punchers. At pivot points, however, they experience clarity and conviction about holding themselves accountable for fulfilling a worthy idea or vision.

The empirical study of the intersection of careers, pivot points, and leadership addresses the real needs people have for a new way to think about their careers in the changing world of work. Rare will be the career of our parents and grandparents with one or two employers over

a lifetime, where tenure and long-term company relationships support career development. Instead, by defining leadership as holding ourselves accountable and tapping our ingenuity to fulfill our best ideas and our best selves, the individual is the self-aware decision maker who enrolls the support of supervisors, colleagues, and human resource executives in career development.

As technology, globalization, and social trends transform work, this worker-centric paradigm emphasizes personal responsibility for career development that counterbalances the traditional employer-centric paradigm. Shared responsibility benefits everyone.

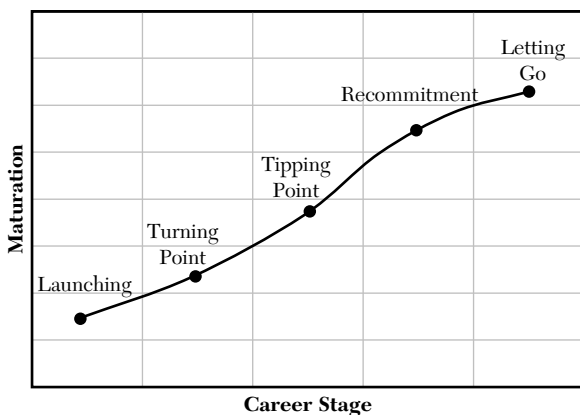
### PIVOTAL DECISIONS DETERMINE THE JOURNEY

In the journey of every profiled leader, pivot points do not mark events per se; they involve a chain of events building up to and immediately following a pivotal decision. At these decision points, these leaders responded with original critical thinking and were fertile with ideas. Some pivot points called for being a visionary leader, others called for being a crisis leader, and still other points arose from personal restlessness. Viewed as a whole process, the five pivotal decisions turned ordinary career paths into leader-making journeys.

“The measure of success,” according to former US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, “is not whether you have a tough problem to deal with but whether it is the same problem you had last year.” Often, senior management stays stuck in the same problem, and their organization stays stuck for years, or even decades. Pivot points are really about preventing stuckness, so to speak, by taking on new challenges and moving forward.

What are these pivotal decisions that brought these gifted leaders to a series of new opportunities and challenges and stages of personal and business growth? (See Figure 1.2.)

1. The *launching* decision makes a commitment to gain mastery of specialized skills and do more than your job. (It’s Malcolm Gladwell’s thesis in *Outliers* that it takes 10,000 hours to achieve mastery.)
2. The *turning point* decision acts on an important opportunity or problem that usually creates a bold, new direction.



**FIGURE 1.2 Five Pivotal Decisions Mark Stages of Career Development**

3. The *tipping point* decision, involving significant risk, breaks through a fundamental barrier.
4. The *recommitment* decision focuses on purpose-driven leadership and sharpens the vision, moving the goalposts further out.
5. The *letting go* decision facilitates new sustainable leadership.

Let's take a closer look at each of these.

The *launching point* moved them out of their comfort zone. All these leaders started out in their careers to make a living. The launching point captured their imagination and work became more than about income. They had goals that riveted their attention, galvanizing them to turn dream into reality. It changed their work and their lives forever, although they didn't know to what extent at the time. The launching point established the platform on which the potential leader would become an actualized leader.

At a *turning point*, the confluence of a willful decision to do more and the pressing need—or opportunity—to take action unleashes an extraordinary verve to take the business to the next level. It's a decision to build a sustainable business that can flourish and not just survive. It tested their capabilities and capacity in various ways, stretching them far beyond their comfort zone and requiring their total commitment. The success curve at this stage strengthened their commitment to what

would become their life work. The turning point laid the foundation for them to become leaders in their fields.

The *tipping point* catapulted them into the work of leading as distinctly different from the work of mastering their subject and running their business. Success already achieved allowed them to fully express their business vision, leadership values, and signature talents. They are honing the art of leading. At this point, they have built a team whom they trust with substantive responsibilities, freeing themselves to focus on the art of leading inside and outside their organizations. In this stage, they hit full stride and fully enjoyed wearing the mantle of power.

There comes a *recommitment point* when leaders look at where they are and where they want to go, knowing they need to renew their commitment or leave. In all the journeys examined, everyone experienced turbulence in his work or in his personal satisfaction after the tipping point, which for most occurred in their late 40s or early 50s. Quite simply, things happen—for many, disruptive change occurs because of being acquired or being the acquirer. For all, this stage is primarily a decision to recommit to self—to their North Star. For some, it was a decision to recommit to the same enterprise; for others, recommitment to self meant the decision to do something different. Whether the decision was to continue or change course, they moved on with new goals. At this point, they knew who they were as leaders and what they stood for, and they wielded their influential power with ease and confidence. They were as passionate about leading as about their vision. In their recommitment they intuitively attained and practiced the art of leading.

Everyone must face the *letting go point*. It can occur at any time when the leader decides another priority or opportunity beckons, when business conditions require a hold 'em or fold 'em decision, or when it's simply time to plan for succession. The ultimate test of leadership is letting go at a time of strength so that others can carry on the work. Letting go isn't just a decision; it is the practice and spirit of release so that others can establish their own paths and leadership. Because leaders by this time have developed such a symbiotic relationship with their work and people, this decision point is the most emotionally challenging. The letting go point is pivotal in defining the terms of the leader's legacy.

These five pivot points do not necessarily occur linearly; they can occur in a zigzag fashion. Over the long haul, however, one can pick out

the most impactful decisions for a progressive march forward, despite setbacks, which result in career-defining achievements.

Two leaders profiled are now 84 years old. Their stories are particularly instrumental because the outcomes of their leadership are known. If we ended their stories when they were 50 or even 65, some decision points would be different from when we see the entirety of their careers. The other leaders profiled are in their mid 50s—old enough to have accumulated a record of sustained achievements, young enough to have more innings left in the game. The decision points having the greatest impact on their entire careers may look different later and are yet to come.

## FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A PIVOTAL DECISION

The seminal moments of abundant energy and imaginative thinking came at different times and in different ways to the people you will get to know in this book. Also, the pivotal decisions having the greatest impact—without which their crowning achievements would not be possible—were different for different people. For Bud Frankel it was the launching decision; for Glen Tullman it was the turning point decision; for John Rogers, the tipping point decision; for Al Golin, the recommitment decision; for Dale Dawson, the letting go decision. But, in all their stories, we find five common characteristics of the pivotal decisions of leadership.

1. *They held themselves accountable.* They did not do it alone, but they took full accountability for making a decision and making that decision work. It was up to them. They did not point to people, issues, or circumstances. And in holding themselves accountable, they quickly learned they had to make the tough decisions because that's what leaders do. That included holding others accountable for their work and letting people go if they could not fulfill their role in, and responsibilities to, their work community. Personal accountability meant no excuses.
2. *There was a moment of truth when making a solitary decision.* Each confronted himself to answer the questions “Will I really? Can I? Should I?” They understood that the decision boiled down to its

essence was one of being true to self. The new path would bring more work, risk, and trade-offs. They explored and discussed their options with people whose opinions mattered. In their decisive moment, however, they knew they were making a solitary decision that would test their wings. No one could talk them into or out of it. It was their decision to make and theirs alone. It was their responsibility to enroll the support of family and secure resources.

3. *There was an impassioned inner voice.* The decisive moment transformed their way of thinking, from environmentally dependent to personally impassioned. They transcended logic and linear thinking, making a pivotal decision that, even with rigorous analysis, came down to a personal judgment call. Once that inner voice prevailed, often against the tide, their way of thinking became increasingly its own ecosystem. In that solitary decision, they had to trust and rely on their own acumen and judgment. It became a self-reinforcing feedback loop. The more progress they made, the more they trusted their own judgment. And the more they became leaders, the more other people turned to them for good judgment and leadership.
4. *They expanded their belief in the power of one person and increasingly believed in the magic that many people working together could create.* They knew they needed help. They had to make others believe in the direction they set. They used their vision as its own currency, something of real value that couldn't be fully monetized. They had to shape the workplace values and culture.
5. *Work became the source of renewable energy.* The decisive moment propelled them to make something out of the ordinary happen. The more they did, the more they wanted to do. Work became their passion. They entered a different zone of determination and energy beyond what they had known, which was considerable. Running through all their narratives is a genuine love for their work. Usually they speak of their passion for the field they are in, but it is also a passion for leading.

Real leaders don't have much use for job descriptions. The pivotal decisions they make shape their jobs and take them where one hasn't gone before and new lessons await. These decisions define what they want people to look to them for and not look to them for in their

leadership. They choose the opportunities, threats, and headaches that they will take on as individuals and as leaders of people on a shared journey. Without making these clear decisions that set the leadership agenda, executives do the work of managing and not the work of leading.

When facing decision points, the choices are far from clear. Even with hindsight, the narratives in this book were not told to me as coherent stories of decision points that connect into a leadership journey. These stories, as they were recounted, cited opportunities, ideas, and luck. People usually see the proverbial door of opportunity as luck knocking on one person's door instead of another's. "Chance," according to the great scientist Louis Pasteur, "favors only the prepared mind." Through the lens of pivot points, we see in hindsight how chance favored these people who brought themselves to each threshold of change and door of opportunity. But the lens can also inspire *foresight*.

Chapter 9 offers ways to make pivot points in your career into defining successes. Readers can do an easy self-appraisal at [www.juliatangpeters.com](http://www.juliatangpeters.com) to see if your actual effectiveness is commensurate with your potential. Seeing where you can increase your leadership quotient helps you make the most of your pivot points.

## **THE ART OF LEADING AND THE SCIENCE OF MANAGEMENT**

Learning from leaders and learning about leadership are very different. It's the difference between art and science. The science of management can be taught, but the art of leading can only be cultivated. Research for this book has convinced me that effective leading is more art than science, and the science should be referred to, more accurately, as management.

My personal definition of leadership is belief in the power of one person and in the magic of many people. The art of leading creates this magic. By leading with mind and heart, leaders inspire others to join their mission and do more than they expected and achieve more than they thought possible. The work of managing, on the other hand, is about incentivizing and directing people to achieve short-term goals. Leading is more about navigating toward the uncertain future and anticipating possibilities that cannot yet be filled in with details. Managing

works with the knowable today. Both are important, indeed, excellence is the foundation for leadership success.

Somewhere along the journey, these leaders crossed the threshold from the science of managing to the art of leading.

As with any scientist, they studied problems, came up with solutions, and validated methodologies. As with any artist, they brought together mind and heart on a very personal, sometimes lonely, individual journey that made a unique impact. Unlike artists, they know it takes a team to get the job done.

Each stage involves a new aspect to the art of leading arising from the paradoxes of leading. For example, how does a leader both trust one's gut *and* be genuinely open to different points of view? How does a leader both have control of the situation *and* not be controlling and micromanage? These dynamics not only can make or break a career, but they can also cause disasters. These questions loom large as heads of companies and governments explain major business failures in terms of being swept along by, or saying they didn't know about, mismanagement and misdeeds below them.

We demystify leadership when we understand it as a developmental journey marked by progressive stages of learning and mastery made possible through our own decisions. This perspective downplays the role of mystifying concepts that make leadership exclusive to those who have the X factor, secret sauce, success traits, DNA, and charisma. Focusing on decision points makes leadership inclusive; we can make the decisions that turn our untested abilities into proven accomplishments.

## THE LEADERS WE SHOULD LEARN FROM

The leaders we are observing in this book have a profile that differs from those of the ones who have been getting all the attention. It's a good time to shine the spotlight on them when the Great Recession that began in 2008 has exposed stunning greed and failure of leadership.

The leaders profiled in this book accomplished much yet avoided self-promotion. They created real and sustainable value. Getting rich quickly was not their goal, although they did reap plenty of financial rewards. They significantly affected their industries. And, they could live next door: They are down-to-earth, hardworking people with simple

values that keep them centered in their integrity. They come from businesses including investment and finance, marketing, public relations, health care, and not-for-profit.

We see in their stories that a leader is a way of being, not just a way of doing; it's from the inside out. As role models, they created and built cultures of excellence and achievement. As mentors, they created workplaces that developed people and their careers as well as social communities. As self-aware people, they made mistakes and got past them. They understood they were on journeys that keep going, recognizing there's always more to learn and more to do.

Despite their extraordinary accomplishments, these are real people who are leaders for the world in which most of us work. They don't pay much attention to cultivating their media image. They do what they do to improve something worth their commitment. They have insecurities. Their personal lives have issues. They are people with whom we can connect, and people we want to know better.

Decisions that were not leader-building decisions did not make it into this book. With that said, leading is also about all the decisions made moment to moment and day to day, one well-reasoned choice after another. For many people, poor judgments in these relatively small decisions can stall, distract, or derail careers. Real leaders make mistakes, but their overarching patterns of behaviors are rooted in values, principles, and vision. Also, a disdain for hypocrisy keeps them on track. Each of their chapters includes their playbook of leader-defining values and principles that sustained their drive and the trust other people placed in them.

They all invented themselves through the decisions they made. In the moment, it's a decision to try something. One thing leads to another, bringing them to new doors of opportunity as well as to unexpected problems. They became champions because they solved and resolved the challenges of leading. They turned risks into rewards.

They earned their place as leaders. This is why the debate about leaders being born or made is academic; in all cases, people evolve into leaders. Here are their stories.

