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Your Life Story

The reservoir of all my life experiences
shaped me as a person and a leader.

—Howard Schultz, CEO, Starbucks

The process of becoming a True North leader begins by unpacking the fundamental question: Who are you?

When you first meet someone and they say, “So tell me a little bit about yourself,” how do you respond? If you are like most of us, you share selected highlights of your life story. In many ways then, we *are* the stories we tell others about ourselves.

In this chapter we ask you to reflect on your life to gain a better understanding of who you are. You will be exploring how various aspects of your story fit together to define you as a unique individual. This is the starting point for gaining greater self-awareness and for understanding what your life and your leadership are all about.

In the 222 interviews we conducted with authentic leaders for the *Emerging Leader Edition* of *True North*, leaders consistently told us that they found their purpose for leadership by mining their life stories. Having a clear sense of their personal narratives enabled them to remain grounded and stay focused on their True North.

These leaders did not define themselves by a list of characteristics, traits, or styles. Although some tried to emulate great leaders early in their lives, they soon learned that attempting to mimic others did not improve their effectiveness as leaders.

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

EXERCISE 1.1: YOUR PATH OF LIFE

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

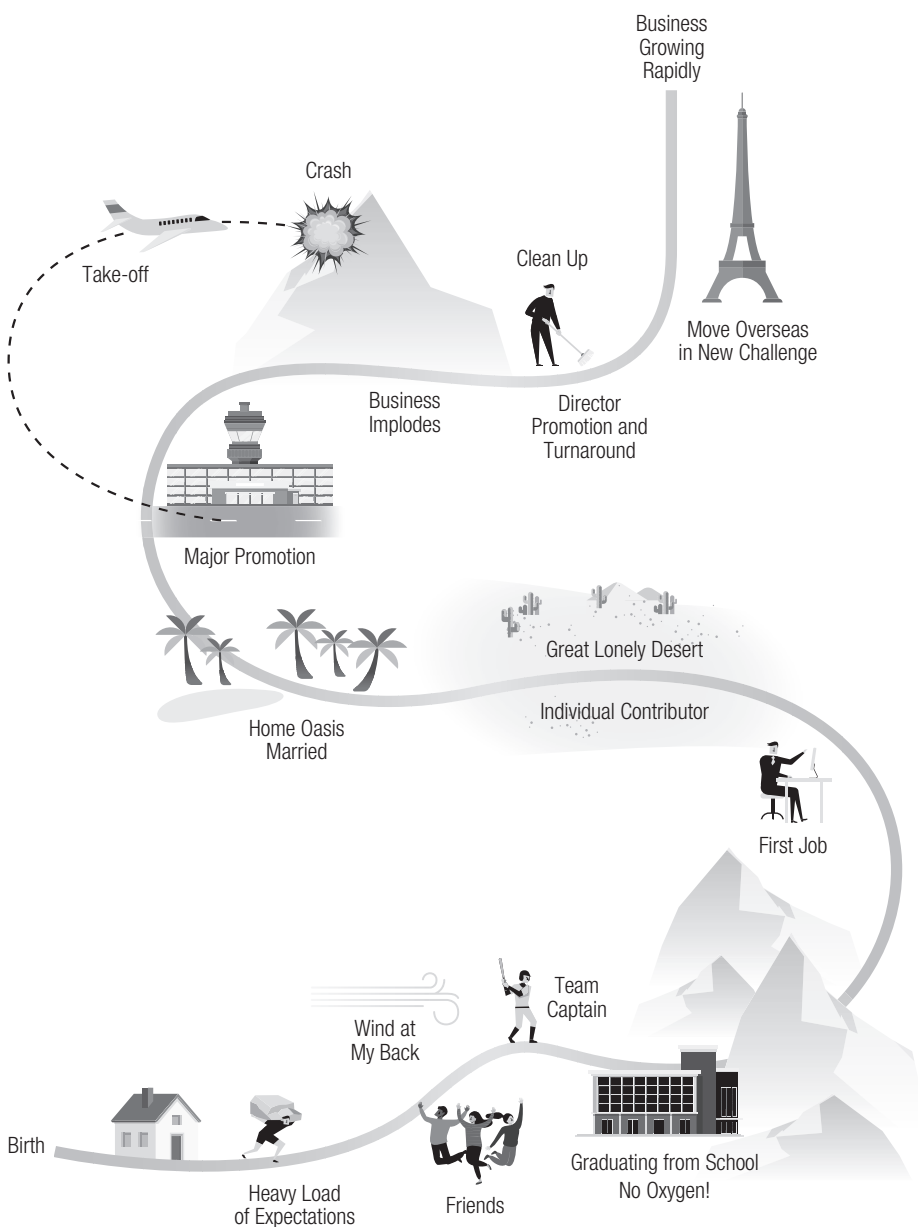


Figure 1.1 Path of Life Example

Your Path of Life

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

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

Add representations for your family, work, hobbies, spiritual life—anything that is meaningful to you.

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

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

LEARNING FROM YOUR LIFE STORY

The story of your life is not your life; it's your story.

—John Barth, *Novelist*

When trying to discover our authentic selves, a good place to start is to examine our life stories. We are largely the stories we tell about ourselves. Stories are the way we capture our experiences in a way that we can understand and in a format that we can communicate to others.

However, as you might have experienced when attempting to draw your path of life, it's not quite that simple. As novelist John Barth reminds us, these “stories” are *not* our lives; they are our stories. They are social constructions, and as such, they have a great deal of play in them. There is no one single, true, and right story of our life.

You've no doubt heard the saying “You are the author of your life.” Look at the path of life you just drew in Exercise 1.1. Now take a few minutes to reflect on the following questions:

- Which story did you ultimately choose to tell when you “authored” this version of your life?
- How did you decide what to include and not to include?
- What's missing and why?
- Imagine all possible versions you considered when drawing your path of life.

- Which one reflects the *real* you?
- What can you learn about yourself by reflecting on the version you ultimately decided to draw here today?
- What audience did you have in mind when drawing this version of your life?
- Would the path you drew look any different if you knew someone else would see it?
- How different might it look if you were drawing it for your best friend? Your boss/teacher? Your parents? Your partner? A prospective employer? A prospective date? A newspaper reporter?

Our life stories are just that; they are stories—personal narratives constructed out of recollections from our past. And since our memories are far from perfect, we have a great deal of freedom in how we author the stories of our life. Context matters. Who we are and whom we plan on sharing them with greatly influence the stories we tell about ourselves. Of all the possible stories we might construct about ourselves, which are the most useful?

For our purposes, we find it helpful to draw a distinction between telling your story as a hero, a victim, or a knowledgeable bystander. We believe that your story work will be most helpful if you cultivate the perspective of a caring, knowledgeable bystander rather than that of a hero or a victim. If you are a hero, you miss out on what you need to work on. As a victim, you miss out on your strengths. As a knowledgeable bystander, you can be your own best friend or mentor, someone who knows you intimately, doesn't pull any punches, but who is on your side. Adopting this perspective is best when authoring our life stories for purposes of discovering our True North.

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

EXERCISE 1.2: LEARNING ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP

Reviewing your path of life, call to mind those times when you had the opportunity to lead. These can be formal positions of responsibility or simply experiences when you had the privilege of stepping up and influencing others. Choose the leadership experience you are proudest of, one

in which you feel you were at your best. In this exercise, put yourself back in that time and describe it as if it were happening to you right now.

Summarize your proudest leadership experience, starting with the general situation.

What was the context or setting?

What triggered your leadership? What caused you to step up and lead?

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

How did you feel. . .

Before stepping up to lead?

When you first stepped up to lead?

When facing the challenges of the situation?

After the results were in?

What insights did you just gain about your leadership as you told this story?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Now let's probe more deeply into this experience when you were at your best so that you can gain even greater insight.

What leadership qualities did you bring to that leadership challenge or situation?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

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

My Leadership Quality

Its Impact on the Outcome

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

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

Dimension

Rating (1–5)

I understood my purpose.

I practiced my values.

I understood my motivations.

I used my support team.

I was an integrated leader.

Now, be your own mentor.

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

If you were mentoring yourself at that time, what advice would you give?

In the same spirit, make a list for yourself.

One thing you did really well:

One thing you could have done better:

One thing you could try next time:

In this exercise, you've taken an important step in understanding who you are when you are at your best as a leader. This type of structured reflection is an important discipline that lies at the heart of our journey to becoming more authentic leaders.

AUTHENTICITY AND EFFECTIVENESS

The relationship between authenticity and leadership effectiveness is straightforward. Emerging leaders have an uncanny ability to assess people's authenticity. When we meet new people, if we judge them to be real, we are more likely to respect and follow them. It's that simple.

Even if we don't agree with their politics, opinions, or necessarily appreciate their style, as long as we deem them to be transparent, trustworthy, and real—authentic—we have established the necessary condition for building a meaningful relationship. Leaders who fail this test rarely succeed.

YOUR JOURNEY TO AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Experience is often said to be the best teacher. Experience is, however, not necessarily a kind or clear teacher. Your life story is in part a

chronicle of your experiences in the world. Comparing earlier with later chapters, you will notice contrasts. In one chapter, you may have been preparing to lead. In another, you might have focused on leading or simply trying to make your way in the world. Some passages may be marked by education or apprenticeship—times when you were operating in the context of rules that structured and measured your activities. Later chapters may come in a different context, perhaps marked by increased responsibilities and fewer rules and structures.

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

Now let's look at your life from slightly different angle. Whereas you told the previous story as if you were experiencing it in real time, now you are going to tell this story in retrospect, from satellite height, surveying the entire arc of your life. Do not limit this reflection to aspects of your career or work-related life. Through our interviews with authentic leaders, we learned that early life experiences were frequently the most formative and were often the most significant contributors to both the type of leaders they became and the formation of their True North.

EXERCISE 1.3: YOUR LIFE STORY

In this exercise, you will explore each chapter of your life story to identify those people, events, and experiences that have had the greatest impact on your identity.

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

Which people, events, and experiences have had the greatest impact on your life?

Now, let’s dig deeper. Consider each chapter in turn, and use the following questions to guide you through the process of identifying the central lessons of your life. Use the list generated above, insights from your path of life, and anything else that occurs to you during this reflective process.

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

Table 1.1 The Impact of Your Life Story

	<i>Chapter 1</i>	<i>Chapter 2</i>	<i>Chapter 3</i>	<i>Chapter 4</i>	<i>Chapter 5</i>
Chapter title:					
The central lesson I take away from this chapter about others/the world is this:					
The central lesson I take away from this chapter about myself is this:					
If I could go back, here is what I would do differently:					
Critical insights from this chapter of my life still affect me in the following ways:					

Now you are going to look at your story as a whole in an attempt to trace the origins of your leadership. If you haven’t yet had the opportunity to lead in a formal way, that’s okay. Be creative. Think more broadly. Even if you’ve never been in a formal position of authority, there have been times in your life when you’ve noticed something that needed to be done, and you stepped up and influenced others to make it happen.

That's leading. The days of narrowly defining leadership as only those actions taken by people in positions of authority are long gone.

Where do you first notice yourself as a leader?

How has this developed over time?

Now focus on those most important people in your life. Consider the impact that parents, siblings, family members, mentors, and friends have had on your inspiration and passion for leadership.

Who had the greatest influences on your leadership? Why?

EXERCISE 1.4: LAUNCH POINT

As you review your path of life and scan the chapters of your story, where are you right now when it comes to your development as a leader? Whether you feel like you've never led in your life or have a rich résumé behind you, it doesn't matter. We are all works in progress. Our development as leaders is an ongoing, emergent process. To help anchor the foundation for your work in the rest of this book, be as honest as you can with yourself and answer the following questions:

Where are you in your leadership journey (e.g., novice, journeyman, legend)?

How sure are you that you want to lead (e.g., clueless, pretty sure, confident)?

How would you describe yourself as a leader?

Have you discovered your True North? If so, what is it?

BUILDING ON YOUR STORY

The journey to discovering your True North starts by looking in the rear view mirror. Our life experiences provide rich grist for the mill of leader development. We are largely the stories we tell others about ourselves. Gaining a deeper understanding and comfort with these stories is the first step toward developing our authentic selves.

Laying your whole life out in front of you can be a powerful experience. Rarely do we step back and see the journey we are on. Through the lens of your life story, you can begin to see the wellsprings of your purpose, values, and motivations as a leader. Some of these have come from your proudest leadership experience; others may be speaking to you from major events in your life that help define who you are, but seem to have no direct bearing on leadership. As the late leadership guru Warren Bennis reminds us, “The process of becoming a leader is much the same as the process of becoming an integrated human being.” This process begins and ends with the stories of our lives.

In the next two chapters, we will delve even deeper into your story by asking you to explore some potentially uncomfortable subjects: the lessons of adversity and the hazards of leadership. It takes courage, but revisiting life’s most difficult experiences and exploring how you might “lose your way” can bring both insight and clarity to your True North.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We are the stories we tell about ourselves.
- Learning from our experiences holds the key to our development leaders.
- To learn best from your story, it is important to step away from both the hero's view and from the victim's view of your life. Adopting the perspective of an objective observer increases the likelihood that we'll see our true selves.
- Your past leadership experiences point the way to discovering your potential as an authentic leader.
- Each chapter of your life contains critical lessons that will help you find *your* True North.

SUGGESTED READING

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