

Mining Your Life Story

Benchmark goal: Draw inspiration from your life story.

The journey to authentic leadership begins with understanding yourself: your life stories and crucibles. I've interviewed many leaders over the years and the stories they've told me cover the full spectrum of experiences, including the impact of parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors; support of their communities; and leadership in team sports, scouting, student government, and early employment. Many leaders were influenced by difficult experiences, such as personal illness or illness of a family member, death of a loved one, or being discriminated against by peers.

These leaders found their passion to lead through their unique life stories:

- None were born as leaders.
- None had innate characteristics, traits, or styles of a leader.
- None succeeded by emulating other leaders.

Rather, by being their authentic selves, they became great leaders, using their gifts to help others. This could happen only if they first understood themselves and their life stories.

Reflecting on Your Life Story

The leaders I've interviewed found inspiration to lead through their life stories. By understanding the formative experiences of their early lives, they reframed their life stories to shape their leadership focused on fulfilling their passions and following their True North.

You may be asking, "Doesn't everyone have a life story? What makes leaders' stories different?" Many people with painful stories see themselves as victims, feeling the world has dealt them a bad hand. Some get so caught up in chasing the world's esteem to fill a wound that they never reflect on what they want. Others lack the introspection to connect the dots between their life experiences and the goals they are pursuing, which can lead to repeating their mistakes.

The difference with authentic leaders lies in the way they interpret their life stories. Their stories provide context for their desire to have a positive impact in the world. By reflecting on their stories, leaders understand how important events and interactions with people have shaped their approach to the world. Discerning our stories, and then reframing them as necessary, enables us to recognize that we are not victims but people shaped by experiences that provide the impetus for us to become leaders.

Novelist John Barth once said, "The story of your life is not your life. It is your story." In other words, it is how you understand yourself through your story that matters, not the facts of your life. You must actively process your life story to gain meaning and inspiration from it.

Can you connect the dots between your past and your future to find your inspiration to lead authentically? What people or experiences have shaped you? What have been the key turning points in your life? How does your past inspire you or hold you back? Where in

your story do you find your passion to lead? How can you leverage your gifts and life story to make a difference?

Sally Jewell: Advocating for the Environment

Sally Jewell says her favorite proverb, “We don’t inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children,” inspires her passion for nature and the environment.

As a young child, Sally moved from England to Seattle when her father was offered a medical fellowship at the University of Washington. Asking colleagues what people did in Seattle, her father was told, “They camp, hike, and join this little co-op called REI above the Green Apple Pie Market on Pike Street downtown.” Sally says,

“My introduction to the outdoors—and REI for that matter—came because my parents asked, ‘What do people do around here?’ Seattle is a beautiful place. It’s a place where we were able to enjoy the outdoors.”

Sally studied engineering at the University of Washington, where she was one of only a few women in her class. On graduation, she received 15 job offers, choosing Mobil Oil. Sally’s passion for the outdoors influenced this decision, as the job eventually moved her to Denver, where she could spend more time skiing and hiking. Those were challenging days for women in the oil fields. She describes regular meetings in men’s offices with *Hustler* centerfolds pinned to the walls, and men who told female colleagues, “I love it when you wear tight sweaters to work.”

These experiences toughened Sally, who doesn’t mince words or put up with nonsense. Once she got a call about an oil leak flowing

into a creek. Flicking his lighter, the contractor told her, “I can take care of that leak real fast.” Sally responded tartly, “Don’t ever suggest anything like that again or your company will never again do business with Mobil.” She says,

I was getting tested all the time by people trying to take shortcuts or people trying to intimidate me or see what I was made of—just bad behavior that’s inconsistent with good business practices. I was fortunate that Mobil is an ethical company and that people would back me up.

After three years with Mobil, Sally returned to Seattle to join Rainier Bank to review energy loans and became more invested in community volunteer work—a time she says was the “connective tissue to the rest of the things in my career.” Her love for the environment and reputation as an “outdoor adventurer, with an inclination toward environmentalism” led her into roles on nonprofit boards, including as founding member of Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust and later to the board of the outdoor retail co-op Recreational Equipment Inc. (REI).

During her 19 years in banking, she rose to executive vice president of Security Pacific, CEO of West One Bank Washington, and CEO of Washington Mutual’s Western Bank subsidiary. When REI faced a liquidity crisis in 2000, she answered the call to become chief operating officer (COO). In 2005, the REI board elected her CEO.

As CEO, Sally and her team reshaped REI’s mission to “inspire, educate, and outfit for a lifetime of outdoor adventure and stewardship.” She endeavored to bring the outdoors into all people’s lives, and support volunteerism and outdoor stewardship. She established REI’s goal of being carbon neutral by 2020, one of the first organizations to do so.

Sally's passion and tenacity brought her to the attention of President Barack Obama, who appointed her Secretary of the Interior in 2013. Sally views public service as a high calling:

For the future of our nation's public lands, we need to establish deep, meaningful connections between young people—from every background and every community—and America's great outdoors. We created "Every Kid in a Park" to give four million fourth graders free access to all of America's public lands. I'd like to see 10 million children learning on public lands.

Sally's life demonstrates that leaders can apply their gifts to all sectors—for-profit, nonprofit, and government—if they have a throughline that motivates them. In Sally's case, the essential challenge of protecting the environment has propelled her to have meaningful impact through different roles across diverse organizations.

Howard Schultz: Building a People-Based Business

When Howard Schultz was seven, his father fell on some ice and lost his job and the family's health care. With no savings to fall back on and his mother seven months pregnant, Howard realized the trap that working-class people were facing. He vowed he would do things differently, dreaming of building "a company my father would be proud to work at" that treated employees well and provided health care benefits. Little did he realize that one day his company would have more than 380,000 employees working in 32,000 stores worldwide.

Howard's life experiences provided the motivation to build Starbucks into the world's leading coffeehouse. "My inspiration comes from seeing my father broken from 30 terrible blue-collar jobs, where an uneducated person didn't have a shot," Howard says. These memories led Howard to provide health coverage for everyone, even part-time employees:

That event is directly linked to the culture and values of Starbucks. I wanted to build a company where you would be valued and respected, no matter where you came from, your skin color, or education. Offering health care was a transforming event that created unbelievable trust with our people. We wanted to build a company that linked shareholder value to the Starbucks culture.

Howard is proud of his roots. He credits his life story with giving him the motivation to create one of the great business successes of our lifetime. But understanding the meaning of his story took deep thought because, like nearly everyone, he had to confront fears and ghosts from his past.

Born in the Bayview Housing projects in Brooklyn, Howard never forgets where he came from or lets his wealth go to his head:

I was surrounded by people who felt there was no hope, and just couldn't get a break. That's something that never leaves you—never. From my earliest memories, I remember my mother saying I could do anything I wanted in America. In contrast, I watched my father break down while complaining bitterly about not having opportunities or respect. What drives me is fear of failure. I know all too well the face of self-defeat.

Howard first encountered Starbucks Coffee in 1982 while making a sales call in Seattle's Pike Place Market. Learning he could acquire Starbucks from its founders, Howard rounded up financing from private investors despite 200 rejections. Then his largest investor proposed to buy the company himself, telling him, "If you don't go along with my deal, you'll never work in this town again. You'll be dog meat." Leaving the meeting, Howard broke into tears. Eventually, he raised \$3.8 million and staved off the investor.

The saddest day of Howard's life came when his father died. Instead of seeing him as a failure, he realized his father had been crushed by the system. Among Howard's greatest talents is his ability to connect with people from diverse backgrounds. He says,

Starbucks gave me the canvas to paint on.

Starbucks is the quintessential people-based business, where everything we do is about humanity. The culture and values of the company are its signature and its competitive difference. People are hungry for human connection and authenticity, and coffee is the catalyst for that connection.

In 2018, when two Black men were arrested for "loitering" at Starbucks in Philadelphia, Howard immediately flew there, apologized to the men, compensated them financially, and spoke openly to the media about the shame and disgust he felt. "This was contrary to everything Starbucks stands for," he says.

Phases of Authentic Leadership

When I graduated from college, I had the naive notion that the journey to leadership was a straight line to the top. I learned the hard way that leadership is not a singular destination—it is a marathon that

progresses through many stages with lots of ups and downs and surprises along the way as you progress to your peak leadership and continue leading through the final stage.

Former Vanguard CEO Jack Brennan believes that the worst thing people can do is to manage their careers with a career map: “The most dissatisfied people I have known and those who experienced ethical or legal failures all had a clear career plan.” Jack recommends being flexible and venturesome in stepping up to unexpected opportunities. “If you’re only interested in advancing your career, you’ll wind up dissatisfied,” he says. The idea of a career ladder places tremendous pressure on leaders to keep climbing ever higher. Instead, Facebook’s former COO Sheryl Sandberg favors the metaphor of a career “jungle gym” where you can move up, down, or across.

The leader’s journey follows the span of life, which now can extend well into the nineties. Individuals move through three periods of leadership with different types of leadership opportunities unfolding in each (Figure 1.1). There will be differences in the pace at which leaders navigate the timeline, but there are many commonalities among their experiences.

- Phase I is Preparing for Leadership, when leaders develop through education and studying, as well as extracurricular experiences and early work as individual contributors.
- Phase II is Peak Leadership, which begins as individuals take on more responsibility for leading others and culminates in their peak leadership experience.
- Phase III is Generativity, a stage of human development coined by psychologist Erik Erikson. It begins when leaders have completed their principal career leadership roles, and it continues for the rest of their lives. In this phase, authentic leaders look

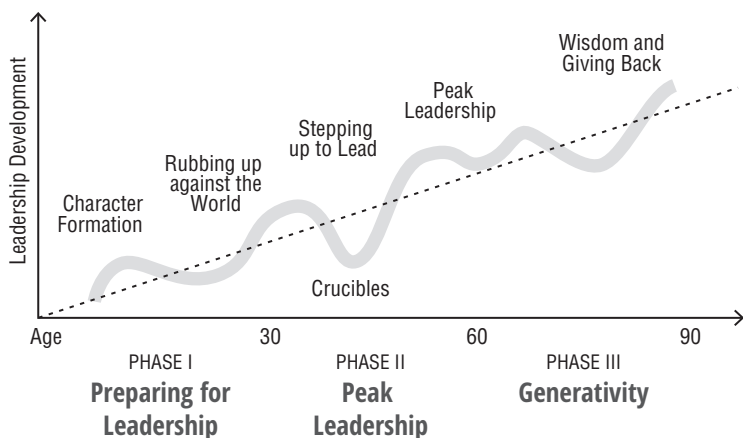


Figure 1.1 The three phases of leadership development.

for opportunities to spread their knowledge and wisdom across many people and organizations, even as they continue active learning.

Phase I: Preparing for Leadership

In Phase I, your character is formed as an individual contributor or team leader. There is a natural amount of self-absorption in this phase. In your teens and twenties, measures of success such as college acceptance or early career assignments are based primarily on individual accomplishments. Venture capitalist and author Randy Komisar describes how life begins to further progress:

“We begin life on a linear path where success is based on clear targets. Life gets complicated when the targets aren’t clear, and you must set your own.”

Gradually, you begin to realize that individual achievement alone will not take you where you want to go. Randy says that by “rubbing up against the world,” you begin to know yourself and see opportunities to chart your own unique path.

Phase II: Peak Leadership

Phase II of your leadership journey begins as you accumulate greater responsibilities, which likely bring personal and professional setbacks that test you to your core. These periods transform your understanding of what leadership is all about and can dramatically accelerate your development. In Week 8, I look more closely at the transition from *I* to *we*, which marks your full arrival into Phase II.

In Phase II, many leaders face crucibles that dramatically test their sense of self, their values, or their career. On the climb to the mountaintop, you will face obstacles that cause you to tumble down into the valley. With time, many leaders process these setbacks and move their sights from success to lasting significance. That’s when the shift from an I-centric worldview to a we-centric approach of servant leadership occurs. It will unlock your passions, values, and capabilities to address meaningful problems and make a lasting difference. Whether you are CEO of a large company, founder of a small nonprofit, or leader of an inside team, peak leadership is finding your stride as you lead others to achieve a fulfilling purpose.

Phase III: Generativity

Phase III, the last phase of your leadership journey, can be the most rewarding of all. Many leaders today are forgoing conventional retirement to share their leadership and wisdom with multiple organizations. They serve on for-profit or nonprofit boards, mentor young

leaders, or take up teaching. Many leaders work across all three sectors: for-profit, nonprofit, and public service.

Leadership guru Warren Bennis described his philosophy of the third phase of leadership with the little-known term *neoteny*: “the retention of all those wonderful qualities we associate with youth: curiosity, playfulness, eagerness, fearlessness, warmth, energy.” Older people with neoteny continue to grow while retaining the youthful qualities of joy, exploration, and discovery. It is a philosophy worthy of consideration throughout our lifetimes, but especially in the final third.

Emerging Leader: Zach Clayton’s Take

My passion for entrepreneurship started as a young child. I launched my first business at age nine, selling yeast rolls based on my grandmother’s recipe. Early imprints of entrepreneurship, business, and leadership were instilled in me by my father, a banker who saw banking as a noble profession that made communities stronger.

When I enrolled at Harvard Business School as a 22-year-old, I was one of the youngest in my class. I earned a place there because of my drive to achieve, and I intended to keep it up. A Henry Wadsworth Longfellow quote scribbled on a notecard by my desk reminded me that great men’s heights were achieved when “they, while their companions slept, toiled upward in the night.”

At Harvard, I met Professor Bill George, who cut an impressive figure on campus. In our early interactions, he asked deeper, more probing questions than anyone I had ever met.

After graduating, I founded a digital media company. To save money, I moved back in with my parents while I was bootstrapping the business—pouring my life savings into the company, working

more than 80 hours each week, and trying to create a make-things-happen culture. Meanwhile, Bill invited me to collaborate with him on his writing. Could an ambitious young entrepreneur ask for a more enriching “side gig” than research for one of the world’s foremost leadership experts?

Ironically, at the time many people on my team at Three Ships would have called me a poor leader. This isn’t false humility. While I had read biographies of the great leaders, while I had heard speeches from top CEOs, while I was personally working with Bill George—I hadn’t yet figured out how to be a servant leader who builds strong organizations by helping build up others. There was a gap between what I knew intellectually about leadership and what I believed in my heart.

At age 27, I went to a three-day leadership workshop and received a 360-degree review based on input from 10 of my colleagues. I opened the envelope excited to read about how much they admired my strengths but instead learned I ranked in the 19th percentile of leadership effectiveness. Comments included things such as “You tend to be extremely impatient, at times creating unnecessary panic or fire drills,” “You can come across angry or abrasive when you don’t get what you’re looking for,” and “Sometimes you’re not clear about what you want, and we unnecessarily work long hours at the last minute.”

Initially, I considered if I wasn’t meant to be a leader and should instead focus my energy on being a high-impact individual contributor. “Maybe I’m not cut out for this,” I grumbled. Gradually, the cold water in my face started to wake me up. I shared the results with my team and asked for their help improving, which is still an ongoing process. I realized I needed to transform from a competing pacesetter into a leader who seeks the best from each person.

My own business crucible occurred in 2017, after I sold one of Three Ships’ subsidiaries to a company owned by a private equity

firm. I joined the acquirer's executive team as chief digital officer. The company had 1,300 employees and was a leader in direct-to-consumer insurance sales. The executive team had semiannual planning meetings in a Park Avenue tower with Jack Welch, the retired CEO of General Electric. We flew around in chartered jets to meet clients and look at acquisitions. It was heady stuff for "a kid" who still paid \$1,000 a month to rent an apartment in my hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina.

In preparation for the company's executive offsite, I sent the CEO a 10-page memo laying out the state of our digital operations, recommending growth strategies, and encouraging us to adopt a mission of helping people secure their financial future through high-quality insurance products. At the offsite, the CEO lectured me that I just didn't get it, saying, "The real reason we are here is to make money and play golf. We'll sell whatever makes the most money." He declared he would "rewire the molecules in my brain" to help me understand that we just needed to squeeze operations harder to drive up contribution margin, sell the business, make three times our money, and get rich.

Our conversation that day flipped a switch. I had arrived excited and energized, ready to make the company better, but I left deflated and disappointed. I vowed to remember that experience as I led other businesses in the future. Shortly thereafter, I walked away from the company despite forfeiting several million dollars in guaranteed payments had I remained.

I wish I could say it's been smooth sailing ever since. As I returned my full focus to Three Ships, I pivoted from our professional services business model into owning our own marketplace websites. We resigned many of our largest client accounts, fired more than a dozen people, and funded operating losses while we waited for the new marketplace business model to take off.

I worked hard each day to make the transition successful, but I tossed and turned at night. Many days were dispiriting. The employees I fired felt betrayed, and those who remained almost certainly wondered if they were following the right leader. Some days I wondered myself: Was I making a catastrophic mistake? Did I know what I was doing? Was I balancing respect for all those I worked with and the need to make sound business decisions?

The wisdom I learned from Bill helped propel me through the dark days. “I am more than my business’s income statement,” I told myself. “The measure of my life is not the success of this business.”

During this time, the outcome of our pivot was uncertain, and I had to let go of my attachment to achievement. While facing hardship, I could feel myself growing. I let go of the need to have a perfect résumé. I learned to name and accept my weaknesses. When I faced adversity, I shared it with my team and asked for their ideas and support. I talked more openly about my mistakes. I laughed more. While still hard-charging, I gave up on the idea that I needed to show up first in the office to set the pace and now enjoy playing with my four children at breakfast time before I head in to work. Most important, I became more comfortable that I am a work in process.

As the weeks and months went on, I could gradually feel the power of the new business model take root. The business purpose came into sharper focus—simplifying the ways people discover, research, and buy. We adopted clear values and made them the cornerstone of how we hired and managed. We stepped up the ways we were investing in employees and the community—getting the Mattress Advisor team to donate truckloads of mattresses or the House Method team to build Habitat for Humanity homes. Our team increased its trust, engagement, and alignment. As we did so, our performance improved—we grew revenue 20 times, expanded from 20 to more than 300 employees, achieved some of the highest profit margins in our industry, and significantly increased employee engagement.

I know my journey will have many more twists and turns. Bill reminds me that many people find their forties the most testing decade. Through working with him, I have come to understand the power of listening to your life and authoring your story.

Get Ready to Tell Your Own Story

When you take the time to examine your own life, the highs and the lows, you will find something to inspire you as a leader.

Activity 1

In this activity, you are going to draw the path of your life to date. Figure 1.2 is an example of what this might look like. On a blank sheet of paper, 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.

Activity 2

As you review your lifeline, what did you learn about yourself in the process?

Looking at your high points, what made these events so special for you?

Looking at your low points, what did you learn from these experiences?

If you had the opportunity to do them all over, what would you do differently?

(continued)

(continued)

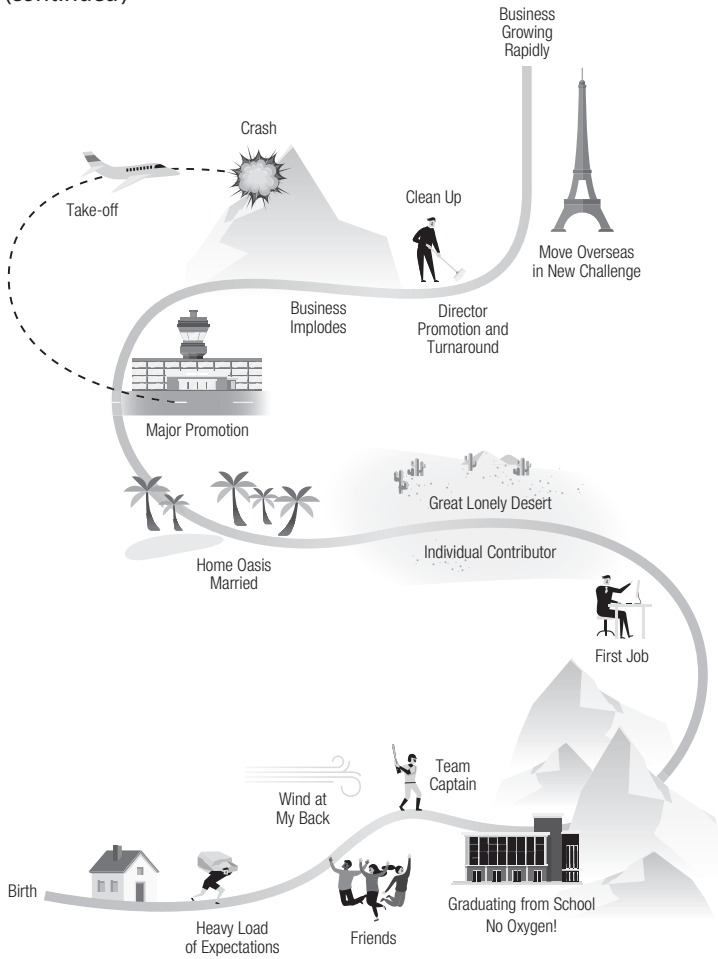


Figure 1.2 An example of a path of life drawing.