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Getting Started

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Over the years we have found that students sometimes struggle to think of themselves as leaders. Some young people (and older people!) believe that leadership is a kind of magical talent that some people are born with, and others aren't. From our four decades of research, we know that is simply not true. Anyone—no matter their age, position, or title—can lead. We also know that anyone, if they choose to, can become a better leader.

Here are seven key concepts from our four decades of research that reveal what is true about leadership. We hope they will inspire you as you begin your leadership development journey.

1. **Leadership is learned.** Leadership is a process that ordinary people use when they are bringing out the best in themselves and others. It is an identifiable set of skills and abilities that is available to everyone.
2. **Leadership is a relationship.** At the heart of leadership is the ability to connect with others, understand their hopes and dreams, and engage them in pulling together for a shared dream of the future. Leaders understand that every relationship contributes to their ability to be successful.
3. **Leadership development is self-development.** Engineers have computers, painters have brushes and paints, musicians have instruments. Leaders have only themselves: that is their instrument. Committing to liberating the leader within is a personal commitment. The journey begins with an exploration of who you are from the inside out.
4. **Learning to lead is an ongoing process.** Learning to lead is a journey, not a single event or destination. You may occupy many leadership roles throughout your life. Each will deepen your understanding of what it takes to engage others and what it takes to inspire others to make extraordinary things happen with people in your life. The context in which you lead will change, and with each change comes deeper learning. The best leaders are the best learners.
5. **Leadership requires deliberate practice.** Excellence in anything—whether it's music, sports, or academics—requires deliberate practice. Leadership is no exception. You will need to devote time every day to becoming the best leader you can be.
6. **Leadership is an aspiration and a choice.** Leaders have countless chances to make a difference. If a person wants to lead others and is willing to do the work, they can lead. It is a deeply personal choice and a lifetime commitment.
7. **You make a difference.** All leadership is based on one fundamental assumption: that you matter. We have seen firsthand how a leader can make a profound difference in the lives of others. To do that, you must believe in yourself and in your capacity to have a positive influence on others. We also know that to those who are following you, you are the most important leader to them at that moment. It's not some other leader. It's you.

DEFINING LEADERSHIP

If you Google “leadership definition,” you will find hundreds of different definitions of leadership. Our research that resulted in *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* led us to the following definition:

Leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations.

What words stand out to you in this definition? Circle, underline, or highlight the words that catch your attention.

Why do you think leadership is better described as an “art” versus a “science”?

Why do you think leadership is about “mobilizing others”?

What do you make of the phrase “want to struggle”? Did that part of the definition surprise you?

Describe in your own words what “shared aspirations” means.

MY PERSONAL-BEST LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

The research to discover what exemplary leaders do when they are at their personal best began by collecting thousands of stories from ordinary people—from students to executives in all types of organizations around the globe—about the experiences they recalled when asked to think of a peak leadership experience, that is, what they did when they were at their personal best as a leader. The collection effort continues, and the stories continue to offer compelling examples of what leaders do when making extraordinary things happen. As you begin to explore The Student Leadership Challenge and The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership, we ask you to respond to some of the same questions asked of those involved in the original research. It's called the personal-best leadership experience, and we believe it will provide you with an inspiring view of the leader within you.

Begin by thinking about a time when you performed at your very best as a leader. A personal-best experience is an event (or a series of events) that you believe to be your individual standard of excellence. It's your own record-setting performance—a time when you achieved significant success while working with others. It is something against which you can measure yourself to determine whether you are performing as a leader at levels you know to be possible.

Your personal-best experience may have happened when you had no official authority but chose to play a leadership role within a group, organization, class project, or even a family situation. Focus on one specific experience.

Step 1

On a separate sheet of paper, describe this leadership experience by answering the following questions:

- When did it happen? How long did it last?
- What was your role? Who else was involved?
- What feelings did you have prior to and during the experience?
- Did you initiate the experience? If someone else initiated it, how did you emerge as the leader?
- What were the results of the experience?

Step 2

With relation to this experience, on a separate sheet of paper, list the actions you took as a leader that made a difference, and answer the following questions:

- What actions did you take?
- How did you get others to go beyond the ordinary levels of performance?

- What did you do to demonstrate your own commitment to the project or undertaking?
- What did you do to make sure everyone understood the purpose or goal?
- What did you or others do to overcome any major challenges or setbacks?
- What did you do to engage others and get them to participate fully?
- Based on what you did or said, what other extraordinary actions did your team or group members take?
- Summarize what you consider to be the five to seven most important actions you took as a leader who made a difference.

Step 3

Review the responses from the questions in steps 1 and 2. What three to five major lessons did you learn about leadership from this experience? (These are lessons you might share as advice to others about them being or becoming a great leader.) Write them here:

Lesson 1:

Lesson 2:

Lesson 3:

Lesson 4:

Lesson 5:

Step 4

From the lessons you identified in step 3:

What single piece of advice would you give to another individual on how to make extraordinary things happen in their organization based on your experience?

THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP MODEL

To learn what people did when they were at their personal best in leading others, we interviewed hundreds of people using the same types of questions you just used to reflect on your personal-best leadership experience. The starting assumption was that asking regular people to describe extraordinary leadership experiences would reveal patterns of success.

Analyzing thousands of students' responses to the personal-best leadership experience proved that despite differences in culture, gender, or age these personal-best stories revealed similar patterns of behavior. No matter where a personal-best experience took place—whether it was in a classroom, a student club or organization, a sports team, a community service project, a part-time job, a religious or spiritual organization, or on a school field trip—when leaders were at their personal best, there were then, and are today, five core leadership practices common to all these examples: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart.

Model the Way

Leaders clarify values by finding their voice and affirming shared values, and they set the example by aligning actions with shared values.

The most important personal quality people look for and admire in a leader is personal credibility. Credibility is the foundation of leadership. If people don't believe in the messenger, they won't believe the message.

Leaders clarify values and establish guiding principles concerning the way people (fellow students, student groups, teachers, and advisors) should be treated and the way goals should be pursued. They create standards of excellence and then set an example for others to follow.

Titles may be granted, but leadership is earned. Leaders earn credibility by putting their values into action and living by the same standards and principles they expect of others. Leaders not only talk about the way things should be done but they also show the way they should be done.

Inspire a Shared Vision

Leaders envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities, and they enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.

Leaders are driven by their clear image of possibility and what their organization could become. They passionately believe that they can make a difference. They envision the future, creating an ideal and unique image of what the group, team, or organization can be. Leaders enlist others in their dreams. They breathe life into their visions and get people to see exciting possibilities for the future.

Challenge the Process

Leaders search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative ways to improve. They experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from experience.

Leaders are pioneers—they are willing to step out into the unknown. The work of leaders is change, and the status quo is unacceptable to them. They search for opportunities to innovate, grow, and improve. In doing so, they experiment and take risks. Because leaders know that risk-taking involves mistakes and failures, they accept the inevitable disappointments as learning opportunities. Leaders constantly ask, “What can we learn when things don’t go as planned?”

Enable Others to Act

Leaders foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships. They strengthen others by enhancing self-determination and developing competence.

Leaders know they can’t do it alone. Leadership involves building relationships and is a group effort. Leaders foster collaboration and create spirited groups. They actively involve others. Leaders understand that they have a responsibility to bring others along. Collaboration is the master skill that enables groups, partnerships, and other alliances to function effectively. The work of leaders is making people feel strong, capable, informed, and connected.

Encourage the Heart

Leaders recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence. They celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

Accomplishing extraordinary things in groups and organizations is hard work. The climb to the top is arduous and long; people can become exhausted, frustrated, and disenchanted. They’re often tempted to give up. Genuine acts of caring uplift the spirit and draw people forward. To keep hope and determination alive, leaders recognize the contributions

that individuals make. In every winning team, the members need to share in the rewards of their efforts, so leaders celebrate accomplishments. They help people feel like heroes.

Embedded within these Five Practices are thirty essential leadership behaviors that are the basis for The Student Leadership Practices Inventory (Student LPI) and are described in the next section of this workbook.



