

PART 1

[THE LEADERSHIP
MAXIMS APPROACH]

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CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING THE LEADERSHIP MAXIMS APPROACH

Imagine being able to explain your leadership philosophy on one piece of paper—a simple 8.5- by 11-inch summation of all you are and all you want to be as a leader. How powerful would it be to have a discussion about that single page with the members of your team? They would be thrilled to have just one page to read, understand, and internalize. Envision how that one page could simplify and clarify how you want your team members to conduct themselves. Think about how impressed candidates and new hires would be if they could quickly understand your standards, expectations, and goals easily and from one single solitary page.

I have had the privilege of working with leaders at companies large and small across many industries, functions, and levels, and the one major commonality across that broad range of experience is the challenge they face—how to clearly, succinctly articulate who they are as leaders, and then lead according to that individual leadership

philosophy on a daily basis. There is no shortage of great thinking on leadership, but the *application* of those thoughts to everyday leadership situations is challenging, especially in corporate environments.

The study of leadership can be daunting. There are massive tomes written on the subject. It is taught in universities and MBA programs. Entire fields of study are dedicated to leadership. Companies create massive corporate programs and universities to foster it in their associates. Yet despite all that, leaders in the trenches still find it difficult to define their own personal style of leadership. It seems even harder to master the day-to-day application of the leadership philosophy they espouse.

Here's the thing—it's really not that hard. Leadership is an intensely personal sport. Every leader is different. But one thing all leaders have in common is the need to understand, articulate, and continuously improve their leadership philosophy and do so in a simple, straightforward way.

We have difficulty nailing down our leadership philosophies because we focus too much on the output of the process (a leadership philosophy) and not enough on understanding how to generate that output. This fixation on output leads us to produce cookie-cutter constructs for what a "good" leadership philosophy looks like. Leaders develop the mindset *If my philosophy doesn't look like the philosophies of other leaders, it must be wrong*. With that mindset, leaders end up constructing philosophies that are eerily similar to those of every other leader around them. Leaders who do this become followers under that approach, and the resulting philosophies tend to use excessive amounts of jargon and buzzwords. Those kinds of philosophies reveal nothing about the personality or true beliefs of the leader and therefore do little to establish a trust-based relationship between the leader and the led. When leaders follow a philosophy that is not truly their own, it can cause them to act like someone they are not; if they claim to believe in such a philosophy but stay true to themselves, they can end up behaving in ways that are inconsistent with the philosophy they profess to follow. These inconsis-

tencies can create confusion and mistrust between the leaders and their teams.

The leadership maxims approach reverses that dynamic. It acknowledges a simple truth—people are complex and multidimensional. It states that *the method* for defining one's leadership philosophy is common to all leaders but *the output* of that process is as varied as the shapes of snowflakes. By accepting that your philosophy can and should be dramatically different from those of others, you free yourself from artificial buzzwords, and you avoid the meaningless corporate-speak everyone can see through in an instant. The leadership maxims approach helps you articulate who you really are as a leader versus who you think the organization wants you to be. This consistency between the leader's philosophy and actions builds trust among the leader and his team and reduces confusion about the leader's expectations and standards. When this occurs, the team can focus on their jobs rather than wasting time and energy trying to figure out their leader.

What I am going to share with you can be your leadership secret (although as part of the process you are expected to share this secret with others). I have personally used and taught this approach for years, and it has been a powerful tool for improving myself and my performance. My own perspective has been informed by my experiences in the military, as a management consultant, as a manager and executive in large companies, and as a leadership trainer and coach. I have worked in multiple industries including financial services, pharmaceuticals, consumer goods, chemicals, health care, technology, academia, and retail. My experiences have spanned many functional areas, from call centers to corporate strategy, and I have worked with leaders at all levels, from frontline managers to senior executives and CEOs.

The approach outlined in this book will help you to clarify, for yourself and others, the heart of your personal leadership philosophy, and to do so simply enough that you can capture it on a single piece of paper. As you apply this method, you will write down fifteen to twenty emotionally powerful statements or reminders of personal events that will serve to guide your behaviors on a daily basis.

To get a complete view of your leadership philosophy, you need to evaluate four aspects of leadership:

- *Leading yourself:* what motivates you and what are your rules of personal conduct? What do you want “future you” to look like and stand for?
- *Leading the thinking:* where are you taking the organization and how will you innovate to drive change? What are your standards of performance for how you will safely get to your destination?
- *Leading your people:* how can you lead them as individuals rather than treating them like faceless cogs in the machine?
- *Leading a balanced life:* if you are burned out, you are worthless. How do you define and achieve balance?

All four aspects of leadership are equally important. Many leadership models focus exclusively on leading your people. That happens because it is easy to conceptualize leadership in a basic leader-led construct. Strategy and innovation models emphasize leading the thinking. Self-help models target leading yourself. And in the frantic pace of today’s environment, leading a balanced life often falls by the wayside. Each aspect of leadership is important in its own right, but focusing on one to the exclusion of others creates imbalance. If you try to understand and build your capabilities in all four aspects of leadership but study them independently of one another, you risk creating a leadership philosophy full of inconsistencies. Even if you are able to make the precepts of your philosophy consistent, you still run the risk of that philosophy being confusing. This could happen because you will have cobbled together multiple frameworks and approaches. Those frameworks are not necessarily designed to work well with the tools and frameworks contained in other theories pertaining to the other aspects of leadership. The result is a philosophy that pieces together interesting components from multiple approaches but it does not actually fit together in a way that is consistent or compelling. If you truly want your philosophy to be well-constructed, the tools you use should all come from the same toolbox. This book is that toolbox.

CREATING YOUR MAXIMS

A maxim by definition is a principle or rule of conduct. In the context of the leadership maxims approach, it is a short, personally meaningful, and easily explained statement that reflects one of your beliefs about leadership. Maxims do not contain buzzwords (like *leverage, optimize, outside the box, win-win*). Maxims are simple, clear statements that serve as reminders for how you want to behave and lead and how you want your team members to behave. When written well, your leadership maxims become simple daily reminders of how you should behave so your actions are consistent with who you want to be as a leader. Your maxims will become your leadership conscience. They will help you make difficult decisions and choose paths consistent with the kind of leader you aspire to be.

Maxims must be emotionally meaningful, so you need to delve into your personal experiences to find those phrases, images, and stories that stir you to your core. By having your maxims elicit an emotional and physical reaction, the likelihood that they will change your behavior is exponentially higher than if you try rallying to a string of meaningless buzzwords. Maxims can be found in painful lessons you have experienced and distilled down to their essence. They can also be drawn from incredibly positive experiences. They can be inspiring song lyrics. They can be images that stand for something you find deeply important. They can be sayings used by family members, teachers, or coaches that hold significant meaning, or quotes from a book or memories that serve as reminders of powerful leadership stories you have experienced. Maxims can come from anywhere or anything. The most important attributes of maxims are that they are clear, pithy, and personally meaningful. By being short and direct, the maxim is easy to remember and access. By being personally meaningful, the maxim elicits a powerful emotional response that leads to behavior change. By being from your own experience, the maxim serves as a vehicle to share your stories with your team and strengthen the bonds of understanding and trust you have with them.

Articulating your maxims requires a process of introspection. You need to answer questions pertaining to each of the four aspects of leadership and use those questions to define your personal approach to leadership in that arena. For this to work, your answers must be open and honest; that is what makes your maxims authentic and easily understood by those around you. The synthesis of your answers into emotionally compelling and resonant statements will serve as the foundation for your leadership philosophy. Your answers will eventually become your personal leadership maxims.

At first, this process may feel awkward. Too often we are taught not to share personal things at the office. Over the years, this mindset can make us stuffy and render our emotions inaccessible. We may build up a defensive veneer of corporate propriety that is difficult to penetrate, and our true selves can be pushed down. Breaking down these barriers can be painful and takes a lot of energy. Your first few attempts at writing a maxim will probably be odd, because there is a good chance you are not used to accessing your emotions in a structured and focused way. You will likely start the process by writing something that sounds good but means nothing. It will be some universal truth no one can argue with, like “I will continuously add value to the organization.” Don’t believe me? Write your first few maxims, then wait a couple of weeks. Go back and reread what you wrote. Is it meaningful? Does it resonate to your core? Do those words move you to action? Do they say something about you as an individual? You may be surprised and disappointed by your answers to these questions.

Once you do have a complete set of maxims that you are happy with—and trust me, if you make the effort, you *can* do this—you will have created a leadership philosophy reflective of who you are as a whole person. Doing this does require you to evaluate all four aspects of leadership at the same time. Through this evaluation, you will build internal consistency in your philosophy by understanding and articulating how the four aspects of leadership relate to one another. A maxim you create for how you will lead yourself must make sense in the context of how you lead a balanced life. The way you lead the thinking will

influence the maxims you define for how you lead your people. Building this consistency and these linkages across these four aspects of leadership will strengthen your entire leadership philosophy.

The all-encompassing nature of your leadership maxims provides you a means for living your leadership philosophy during every waking moment of your existence. It is that constant application of your leadership maxims that strengthens the leader you are and will become. Theory is nice. *Application* is where you have an impact on the world around you.

APPLYING YOUR MAXIMS

As you apply your maxims on a regular basis, your behaviors will become more predictable for your team members, colleagues, friends, and family. That predictability and consistency are the foundation of trust for all your relationships. You can achieve consistency through the maxims approach first, because you have written your maxims down as rules you'd like to live by and second, because you have shared those maxims with others. That sharing strengthens your accountability for living up to those standards. As a simple example, imagine you tell yourself you are going to swear off cookies and lose five pounds. If you do not tell another soul about your no-cookie rule or your goal, how susceptible will you be to breaking your rule when you see that brand new box of double-stuffed cream-filled cookies in the pantry? I am pretty sure if you are anything like me you will pour yourself a tall, cold glass of milk and dig in. But what if you've told everyone in your family about your goal and your no-cookie rule? You are more likely to adhere to that rule, because now you are not only letting yourself down by not following it, but you also are showing your weakness to other people you care about. Many of us can accept letting ourselves down, but letting down others we care about stings a great deal. Sharing your maxims with people you care about is a powerful reinforcing technique for making your desired behaviors stick.

Your maxims are a reflection of your leadership beliefs at a given point in time. They will change as you grow and have new experiences or deal with different leadership situations. By virtue of understanding and accepting the evolving nature of your maxims, you are committing to regular introspection and reevaluation of your leadership philosophy as the world around you changes and you find yourself in new circumstances. The constant evolution of your maxims makes them more powerful every day. The dynamic nature of maxims creates an environment in which you are continuously improving your skills as a leader.

I unwittingly stumbled upon and used the leadership maxims approach when I was a young platoon leader in the army. When I took over my unit, I unsuccessfully tried to explain to my soldiers what I believed in as a leader. I failed because the concepts I articulated were full of jargon but devoid of meaning. Eventually I began telling them “I have two expectations of you, and you can have the same two expectations of me: work hard and be honest. That’s it. If we all do those two things, I can’t ask anything more, and we’ll succeed at whatever we’re doing.”

It clicked. Those two simple expectations resonated. They were deeply meaningful for me. They were easily understood by others. We could evaluate every daily action against those two principles and quickly determine whether we had lived up to that standard or not. My soldiers and I used them on a regular basis, and they helped drive behavior and set standards both for ourselves and for each other. My leadership maxims were born.

The maxims approach requires you to share your life experiences with others, which can be very difficult. Many of those experiences may have been painful, or you may consider some of them too personal. The thought of sharing these stories with people you don’t know well can prompt all sorts of uncomfortable thoughts. *What if someone makes fun of me? What if they think I’m weak because I cry at the end of Old Yeller? Will they still respect me if they know I struck out in kickball in third grade?* These nagging doubts and fears are the barrier between you and authenticity. Those fears lead you to erect walls that keep others out and keep your

emotions in. If, however, you tear down these walls, you humanize yourself. You become less intimidating as a boss. People will see you not as an emotionless instrument of the machine, but as *you*, in all your imperfect glory—and they will respect you for it. They will be more likely to trust you because you have shared personal truths about yourself with them.

Allow me to demonstrate. I once struck out playing kickball in third grade. Not that I was extremely uncoordinated as a kid; I was simply having a bad day. Three pitches. Three mighty swings of a Converse-covered right foot. Three colossal whiffs. It was humiliating. The laughter was deafening, and I thought I was going to die from embarrassment. That game happened thirty years ago, so now I am able to simply laugh at that strikeout. Sure, it still smarts a bit when I first remember that moment, but time and perspective have eased that pain, and I have taken away a lesson from it. There have been instances since that strikeout when I have done something embarrassing and others have laughed, but instead of wallowing in the pain of being laughed at, I have instead touched on a personal maxim: *We all strike out at kickball once*. Doing so reminds me that no matter how hard people are laughing at me for something, at some point the laughter stops and life continues.

Sharing your maxims and the stories that go along with them is humanizing. It will help your colleagues empathize with you, and if they can empathize with you, they can connect with and relate to you. This helps build the respect and understanding necessary for developing an interpersonal relationship. All you have to do to make that connection is share something personal. In my case, I had to overcome my fear of being laughed at and tell my colleagues I'd struck out at kickball. By doing this, I was implicitly telling them I trusted them not to mock me when I shared my story. That first extension of trust begins building our relationships with one another.

Your first attempts to examine your past will likely be stilted and guarded. You may have repressed your emotions for a long time without realizing it. True feelings of joy, pain, fear, triumph, and excitement

are lurking below a crust of professionalism, maturity, and insecurity, and breaking through those layers is hard work. The good news is, the more comfortable you get with the approach, the more personal your maxims will become. Including your personal story as the foundation for your maxims is the key to successfully articulating a leadership philosophy that will help you build powerful relationships and serve people, yourself included, as a courageous leader.

As you follow the maxims method to the end, you will find your maxims flow more and more easily. You will become more comfortable sharing who you really are as a person. Again, after you finish going through the process once and then go back to reread the first maxims you wrote, you may be disappointed in yourself. You may see stoicism and cynicism holding your emotions back in those first few maxims. But as you keep reading your work, you will see a tremendous difference in how much you have shared about yourself in writing your later maxims. You are learning how to access your feelings. Remember—your maxims are a living document. Once you realize how cold and unemotional your first few maxims are, you can revise them, infusing them with the richness of your experience. It is only once you finally get over your emotional hang-ups and decide to put yourself out there in a way that exposes who you truly are that you can make the leap into authentic leadership. The maxims approach is your bridge over that gaping void we mistakenly call leadership in our too-often cold, emotionless business world. Once you are on the other side, you will understand how powerful you can be as an imperfect and genuine leader.

THE BENEFITS OF THE LEADERSHIP MAXIMS APPROACH

The leadership maxims approach has many benefits. First, your maxims will help you set aspirational goals to be a better leader and to continue your personal and professional growth. Second, your maxims will set expectations for your team members for how you want them to behave.

These expectations reduce confusion and inefficiency stemming from the perennial question *What's on the boss's mind today?* Third, your maxims will help you and your team members make better decisions more rapidly, because you will have an established set of principles for how you want to behave as a leader and how you want them to behave as members of your team. These principles will be defined during times of calm and introspection. They will be used in times of chaos and confusion. When those times of chaos arrive, you can simply rely on a predefined rule of conduct and make what you know will be a good decision because it is consistent with previously articulated values. You will no longer have to hold multiple meetings and evaluate all possible choices before you can make a decision with which you are comfortable.

If you are serious about trying a new approach to leadership and you are committed to writing your own set of maxims, you need to think of this as a workbook, not a “reading book.” The rest of this book is divided into five parts. The following four parts cover the four aspects of leadership: leading yourself, leading the thinking, leading your people, and leading a balanced life. The fifth part covers how you can put your maxims into action on a regular basis so they can begin changing your behavior and the behaviors of your team. In each of the leadership aspect sections I will explain that aspect, then guide you through a series of pointed questions related to that aspect. As you read those questions, I will share how other leaders and I used them to guide the creation of one of our personal leadership maxims. I have shared my personal maxim for every set of questions in this book, to provide an example of how one person can go through these exercises and create their own maxims, as well as to give you a sense for how, when done well, the resulting set of maxims paints a complete picture of one individual leader. You will see how my maxims reinforce one another and how the combined set of maxims provides a consistent view of what my teams can expect from me as a leader. In many sections I have also provided examples of maxims generated by other leaders. These examples, from leaders in different industries, functions, countries, and levels

of organizations, will give you a sense of how broadly applicable the method is while at the same time how very different the resulting maxims can be for different individuals. After you read our stories and maxims, you will write a maxim of your own and document it in the appendix of this book.

Don't worry—I will provide plenty of guidance, suggestions, and ideas on how you can create your maxims. When you have worked through all four aspects of leadership and answered each associated question, you will have created your first draft of your own personal leadership maxims. Going through this process will require significant effort on your part, but I think you will learn a great deal about yourself and your approach to leadership along the way, and you will find those insights tremendously satisfying. I will ask you to be thoughtful and to share personal stories about yourself you may never have shared before. I promise that if you approach this work thoughtfully, bravely, and authentically you will end up with a powerful leadership document that will guide you, your team, your decisions, and your behaviors for many years to come.

Leadership takes effort, but the practice itself should not be exceedingly complex. The key to great leadership is knowing who you are as a leader and who you want to be, and being rigorous in how you define those beliefs in a compelling yet accessible way. Some of you may be thinking *Wrong! Leadership is about the actions you take!* I agree that actions matter, but you are a step ahead of yourself. Allow me to ask you this—on what basis will you decide whether an action is a good one or a bad one? Without a clear leadership philosophy, taking action is dangerous. Yes, you have innate beliefs that guide your actions. I am asking you to make those beliefs *explicit*. The process of defining and articulating the beliefs that guide your actions is the leadership maxims approach.

Now, I invite you to embark on that journey of understanding who you are as a leader, who you want to be, and how you would like to get there. You are going to define your entire leadership philosophy—on one piece of paper.