

CHAPTER 1

My Personal Leadership Story

Great leaders aren't born; they are made—made and shaped by their experiences. Gandhi's mother was very religious and influenced by Jainism, a religion founded on the idea of nonviolence toward all creatures. A village schoolteacher refused to teach a young Susan B. Anthony long division because she was a girl. Margaret Thatcher gained experience weathering criticism when, as education minister in the early 1970s, budget cuts earned her the nickname “milk snatcher.” When Richard Branson was about seven years old, his mother, Eve, left him three miles away from his home on the way back from school so he would be forced to figure out how to get home on his own. She did it to help him overcome his crippling shyness. It took him ten hours, but he did it; and it helped him become the person and the leader he is today.

Like Gandhi, Anthony, Thatcher, and Branson, every leader has a story. But most leaders aren't fully aware of how their experiences have shaped them to be the leaders they are now. I believe it's crucial for leaders to take time to think about their history and their own personal leadership stories.

Take a moment to think of the key experiences that have shaped you as a leader. I hope some stories are already coming to mind for you. Some will be stories of peak experiences when you had a significant impact—when you were at your best. Others will be more negative—moments when you struggled and your personal resolve was tested. Reflecting on

all of these moments of leadership will give you a clearer vision of who you are as a leader and why you lead the way you do.

I have seen it hundreds of times in my work. In leadership development programs, my team and I take people through an exercise that helps them build a Personal Leadership Timeline: a list of the key experiences, both positive and negative, they believe have shaped them as leaders. These stories can come from childhood, school, work, or life in a community. This kind of personal reflection is easier for some people than for others, but everyone I have worked with has come away from this exercise with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and commitment for his or her leadership role.

My own leadership story is based on several key experiences. I'm going to share my story with you because it's important for you to understand where the ideas in this book come from and because I hope it will help you reflect on your own personal leadership story.

Is Leadership Worth Dying For?

Most leaders don't ever have to ask themselves this question. I did very early in my career, soon after I started my first full-time job.

Do you remember how you felt when you first started your working life? If you were like me, you wanted to change the world, to really show the value you could bring to an organization. I got a job as a caseworker with a large public-sector organization that helped some of the neediest people in society, providing financial support and services to help people get back to school or find a job.

Most of my colleagues were nice people. They were very dedicated to their clients. But they weren't that dedicated to the organization. Most showed up at 8:30 AM and left at 4:30 PM sharp every single day. Maybe they had been turned off by the bland working environment. Everything in the office was beige—the walls, the floors, even the desks and chairs. Even the people seemed beige—or at least bland.

The supervisors and managers were decent individuals, too, but they weren't very inspiring. They did what they were told. They respected the hierarchy and their place in it. Senior management seemed distant. Few employees had direct access to them, and as far as I could tell, they didn't have much impact on the organization.

A month after I started, I was already wondering whether this was really the place for me.

I had done what I was supposed to do. I went to college, got good grades, and landed a solid full-time job. All I had to do now was be loyal, and the organization would take care of me until I retired. This was the old-fashioned concept known as job security. But I was soon realizing it wasn't enough to build a career on. I wanted not just to have an impact on my clients' lives but also to make a difference to the organization as a whole. This was the moment I learned how much the culture of an organization can undermine an employee's sense of engagement.

Things improved a little when I started a new role working as a career counselor. This role was better aligned with my own interests, not just in giving a handout as a caseworker but also in giving a hand up. I actually started to feel like I was running a new start-up within a large organization. I soon learned I had a strong entrepreneurial side. I was a builder—not a maintainer.

My work captured the attention of a senior manager named Zinta. She was a quiet and reserved person whom I had only known from a distance. She started coming by my office to talk about my work and the new programs I was building. In those discussions, I told her some of my ideas for improving our work environment. One day, she said, "We need someone like you in management. You're a big-picture thinker. You have a strategic mind and you know how to get things done. This would really help our management team."

Nobody had ever said anything like that to me before. That conversation made me think about myself differently. I began reading books on management. I wanted to learn more about what Zinta saw in me.

A few weeks later, Zinta dropped by my office again. This time she shared an idea she had. She suspected that I wanted to have a greater impact on the organization, and I agreed. She then told me she was setting up a committee to find ways to make our work environment more positive. She asked whether I would be interested in helping her out, and I jumped at the opportunity.

Much to my surprise, as the work of our committee began to take effect, things actually started to improve. Employees became more enthusiastic. The organization was starting to feel more positive. Everyone was more engaged. You could feel the changes starting to happen in

that place. While the walls, floors, and desks were still all beige, the workplace had more life and vitality. This was the moment I learned that the culture of an organization could be changed for the better, and that one person could make a difference.

Things were going pretty well for me. My job was fulfilling. The work environment was more positive and energizing. I was feeling like I was having a real impact. Then disaster struck. Zinta was diagnosed with lung cancer, and she had to leave immediately to start treatment.

She was gone for several months. As soon as she left, the changes we worked so hard to create began to slip away. Upper management disbanded the committee Zinta had started. They told those of us on Zinta's committee to focus on doing our own jobs and leave the organizational stuff to them. Those of us who worked with Zinta started to be passed up for promotions. I was told I didn't have what it took to be a manager. My engagement eroded even further. I was frustrated, but even more than that, I was confused. I couldn't understand why upper management wouldn't want us to create a better work environment. Plus, I was getting some seriously mixed messages about my future with the organization.

As the weeks continued to pass, I heard that things weren't looking good for Zinta, so I decided to visit her at home. As I approached her porch, I could see her waiting for me behind the screen door. I immediately saw that the disease was getting the best of her. My heart sank.

I had brought her a fruit basket and she thanked me. She offered me some tea. We sat down and started talking about her treatments. She seemed confident in her ability to fight her disease, but she quickly changed the subject. She wanted to know how I was doing. At first, I kept things superficial; after all, I was there to talk about her. But she kept pressing, so I opened up and shared my experiences, my frustration, and my confusion with my role.

Then she started talking. She told story after story of her experiences as a manager. She described at length the petty office politics, the discouraging atmosphere, and the lack of genuine trust among her fellow managers. She described her regular battles with upper management who resisted her every effort to make the organization better. I could feel her anguish. Then she said something that took me by surprise. She said, "You know, Vince, I've always taken care of my health. I've never

smoked a cigarette in my life, and I have no history of lung cancer in my family. I believe the disease I'm fighting today is a direct result of all the stress I have experienced being a manager in this organization."

I was stunned. As I left Zinta's house, I grieved for her. I felt angry about why she had to endure what she did. As the days passed, I couldn't get Zinta's words out of my mind. I started to wonder what they meant to me and whether I would ever be prepared to pay the price she had paid.

Two weeks after my visit, I received an envelope in the mail from Zinta. When I opened it, I found a card thanking me for the visit and the fruit basket. There was also a letter folded inside, and here's what it said:

Vince,

I understand you may have received a mixed message recently regarding your objectives. Success is a funny thing. Like physics, every action has a positive and negative reaction. On one hand, success has the effect of giving one a sense of achievement, pride in the accomplishment, affirmation of skills, and promotes a desire to expand to the next horizon.

The other side is the reaction from others. Some will rejoice in your achievements. Others, perhaps because of their own insecurities, will feel threatened. These people will inadvertently or purposefully make moves to discourage you, undercut the significance of your success, or redirect you to paths that are less threatening to them. Some people are jealous of others' success. (Why does he get all the "breaks"?) Little do they realize that opportunities exist for everyone.

The choice remains yours. Which of the above will influence you? I encourage you to always be the best you can be and take advantage of opportunities as you find them. You have everything to gain.

Hope this helps,

Zinta

When I think about what it means to be a leader, I think about Zinta and her letter. In the midst of her struggle to survive, she took the time to reach out to a young colleague who needed some encouragement.

Zinta died two weeks after I received this letter, and the organization died along with her. That was the moment I learned that although one leader can make a difference, one leader can't sustain culture change on his or her own. Weeks and months after, I reflected on Zinta and her

experience. I had many questions. Was her cancer really a result of the stress she endured in that organization? I don't know for sure. But she believed it was, so strongly that the stress must have had some negative effect on her health.

I often asked myself, "If things were so bad for her, why didn't she just leave the organization?" Over the years, I've been surprised to find how many leaders have lived in working environments almost as bad as the one Zinta put up with. I also discovered the one common factor—they were all Baby Boomers. This generation grew up expecting to persevere and put up with whatever they had to. If you worked for a jerk, you put up with it. If you worked in a dreadful work environment, as Zinta did, you just put up with it. In a weird way, putting up with all the bullshit was like a badge of honor for many Boomers.

I knew I was wired differently from Zinta. That letter forced me to reflect very early on in my career on two important questions: What is leadership? Is it worth dying for?

I learned from Zinta's example that I wasn't prepared to sacrifice the way she had, not for an organization that didn't deserve it—not for an organization that didn't aspire to greatness. An organization like that doesn't deserve the commitment and energy of its employees. That was as clear to me early in my career as it is today.

Zinta's experience also taught me that there isn't an artificial division between our work lives and our personal lives. We each have one life, and there's no reason to spend it in a dreadful organization led by uninspiring managers and leaders. Moreover, work is a big part of our lives. We spend a lot of time at work, and for most of us it's the main way we contribute to society. So I believe it's critical that we make it the best experience we can. And if we do, we all win—employees, customers, shareholders, our families, and our communities. Organizations make our world work. We need them to be strong and vibrant, not uninspiring and soul-destroying. I have come to learn that it all begins with accountable leadership.

At the time I worked with Zinta, people didn't really talk about leadership. It was all about management, and being a good manager was about doing what you were told and ruffling as few feathers as possible. Respect the hierarchy. Do as you are told. Twenty-five years after Zinta died, I decided to start sharing her story because I believe we need to do a lot better when it comes to leadership.

Zinta's letter changed the way I thought about my life's work. It also changed my life in a more practical sense: It inspired me to start my own consulting business. I didn't realize it then, but Zinta challenged me to make a critical decision—a leadership decision.

What I also didn't realize at the time was that the moment I made that decision, I began a quest—to learn how we can create compelling organizations with leaders who truly inspire others to succeed. I wanted to find and work with like-minded individuals who aspired to create something special in the organizations they led. Unfortunately, finding those people would not be easy.

When I started my consulting business, I focused first on providing private career counseling services to professionals. My work with these clients was gratifying. They began to invite me into their organizations to deliver workshops for their employees. I quickly found I enjoyed that work even more. I also learned that although career counseling let me have an impact at an individual level, leading seminars gave me the opportunity to have an organizational impact. This really appealed to me. Over time, I began to shift my business, relying less on individual career counseling and more on work inside organizations.

All the projects I worked on had one thing in common: change. I continually worked with organizations, individual leaders, teams, and business units that were at an inflection point. They needed to change to survive but didn't know how. That's when I learned that even people and groups who want and need to change tend to resist it.

As my work grew more complex and strategic in nature, I decided I needed to learn more about organizational development, leadership, and change. This is when I began to pursue my graduate degrees. I continued to run my business while I was in graduate school, and I found being part of these two worlds at the same time fascinating. I would read about leadership theories and then test them out with my clients. I learned which ideas really were valuable and which were theoretically interesting but not connected to the real world. This was the moment I learned to always favor practical, actionable ideas.

My graduate courses made me think about my client work differently. I started to see organizations in a more systemic way. The more I learned, the more I could see what got in the way of success. I started to focus on what has become the central theme of my career: holistic ways of thinking about business and leadership. I was kind of a misfit in my

graduate courses. I was self-employed, working with private-sector organizations while my fellow students worked in education, health care, or the public sector. This was the moment I learned that exposure to ideas from other fields can be immensely valuable. Being a misfit is perfectly fine; in fact, it may help you in ways you don't even appreciate at first. I eventually did my doctoral research on what I termed "holistic leadership." I found leaders who shared a common way of thinking about leadership and building compelling organizations. They became my research participants and my teachers. They became my beacon for hope. Little did I realize then how much I would end up relying on that hope to deal with the challenges I would face in my consulting work.

Why Are Some Leaders Such Jerks?

I worked with one company led by a CEO whom many employees described to me as the "classic asshole." Larry was a savvy business leader, but he was also arrogant and pompous. To make matters worse, he used fear and intimidation as his primary approach to leadership. People said that every time they interacted with Larry, they left feeling demeaned and deflated.

Human resources (HR) brought me in to run a leadership development program for mid-level and senior leaders. Larry was in one of my initial interviews, and within five minutes he set an adversarial tone. He went on a rant trashing HR and made it clear he was just putting up with this program. He didn't believe they needed it. When I asked him to describe his approach to leadership, he said, "It's easy. Fear. Your people have to fear you if you're going to be effective."

Once I started running the program, a lot of people wanted to talk about Larry. His senior leaders struggled with his style, but he was the boss. I told them that they had a responsibility to give Larry honest feedback. It would help him become a better leader. But nobody wanted to speak up—they just put up with him, and Larry continued to be, as many referred to him, "the classic asshole."

I ended up working with this organization through one of the biggest crises it had ever faced. Employees from a major supplier went through a nine-month strike, crippling my client. However, the leaders really stepped up and kept the organization going. They were struggling. They didn't achieve their financial goals—a failure they weren't used to.

But they managed to keep the company profitable, which was an amazing accomplishment in light of the crisis.

The leaders I worked with felt pretty good about themselves after the crisis was over. The company got positive media attention for the way it managed the situation. And the leaders came to trust one another more and work together better. Adversity can tear you apart or make you stronger; in this case, it made the leaders stronger.

About a week after the crisis was over, the senior leadership had a meeting with Larry. They were all expecting him to congratulate them for managing so well. But he didn't. Instead, he told them they were lucky to pull through, and he proceeded to point out all the times they had failed during the strike. When I talked to the leaders about this meeting, some of them had tears well up in their eyes as they retold this story. I heard them out and then asked, "Why didn't any of you stand up to Larry?" Complete silence filled the room.

I told them that leaders need to have the courage to call out bad behavior, no matter where it comes from. It's about speaking truth to power. It's not easy, but it is necessary at times. They told me that no one stood up because they were afraid—afraid of what Larry could do, afraid that they would lose their jobs. I felt for them. It was difficult to watch grown men and women talk about being belittled like that. Little did I know then that this theme of courage would become so prominent in my work with leaders.

I felt obligated to talk to Larry. I knew firsthand the negative impact that his behavior was having, and he needed to know. Someone had to have the courage to talk to him. I also knew he would not react well. He would probably retaliate by ending my contract. But that didn't bother me. I was more concerned that he would make things worse for his leaders once he found out what I had learned. Things were already bad enough for them. My contact in HR told me not to bother. He said the leaders would have to come to terms with Larry in their own ways. And over the next few months, they did—a few of them resigned, but most just put their heads down and kept putting up with it. No one had the courage to talk to Larry directly.

This experience weighed on me for quite a while. I kept asking myself what I could have done differently. But in the end, the real questions were: Why do organizations put up with leaders like Larry? Why are there so many people like him out there? What do they hope to

achieve? Clearly, that company was very successful; it is possible to drive success through fear and intimidation, but that strategy can only get you so far. Leaders like Larry get the worst of their people. They waste the human potential of their teams. So much potential is left unrealized. So much potential is destroyed.

This is the moment I learned that, to change organizations, you need a little bit of naïve optimism. You have to believe in the potential of leaders and employees and what they can do to create great organizations. Unfortunately, great leaders and great organizations are the exception. The real work is in helping all those other leaders and organizations to be better. My personal resolve grew stronger. I became even more committed to my quest.

Why Are Many Leaders So Lame?

A little later in my career, I worked with a technology company whose founder and CEO, Jim, was a brilliant guy. He designed software for the financial services industry, and he was very successful. Customers came knocking on his door. His company grew quickly. But as a leader, he was a little rough around the edges. He could be hard on his people. But everyone knew his intentions were good, so it didn't bother them that much.

By the time I was brought in to build a leadership program, the company was struggling. New competitors had entered the market, and the company's software was starting to look dated. Talking to employees in the company, I learned that product development staff never communicated to those in marketing, and marketing staff never talked to those in sales. Success had made them lazy and complacent. Sales leaders were in the field promising release dates for new versions of the software, creating customer demand for a product that nobody was actually building. It was an absolute mess. How had these leaders let it get this bad?

The leadership forums I designed and ran were difficult meetings. The leaders only wanted to sit around and blame one another for the company's problems. They were too focused on their own small silos—they weren't operating as one company.

When the business had been doing well, the dysfunction didn't seem to matter—everything was easy. Cash kept streaming into the company.

This success had given the company a false sense of security and a false sense of how good it really was. That's when I learned that the numbers don't always tell the whole story.

Now that sales were lagging, everyone had noticed the cultural and organizational problems, but nobody knew what to do about them. Jim was at a loss, and the other leaders were stressed out, realizing that they were the ones who were going to have to figure out how to save the company. They were all under great pressure to turn things around. But they weren't responding. They were inept. They were helpless.

One day after another tough meeting with this group, I went to the parking lot and put my laptop bag and materials in my car. As I went to close my trunk, I looked up at the client's office building. I saw the floors where my client had offices. I pictured all those leaders who spent all their time fighting with one another, and then I pictured all the other floors with other companies in that office building, each one playing out its own self-created drama. It was only from outside the building that you could see how small those fights were, how much they distracted everyone, and how much they got in the way of success. This is when I began to understand that to create a strong organizational culture, you need to begin with a strong leadership culture.

In my experience as a consultant, I find many organizations have weak leadership cultures. Some are dreadful and others are completely dysfunctional. What's important to understand is that they are made that way, often by default, because few leaders pay attention to this thing called leadership culture.

However, I do find that there are a few truly exceptional leaders who have figured it out. They deliberately build strong leadership cultures in their organizations. I am fortunate to work with a few of those leaders. They show me that leadership culture can be a powerful and positive force in organizations. But it is also fragile. And the moment you stop paying attention to it, it begins to erode.

In the end, I have also learned that we all have a choice. We don't have to put up with uninspiring or toxic leadership cultures. We can create great ones. But it takes concerted effort to build and sustain them over the long term. It means you have to be relentlessly focused on keeping the cultures strong. It all begins with an aspiration for great leadership.

At that point in my journey, I also thought a lot about the quest I was on. I realized that as a consultant, I would always be on the sidelines, helping my clients but not really creating cultures myself. I enjoyed consulting, but I wanted to help build a business, too. I didn't just want to be a leadership expert—I wanted to be a leader. So I decided that I needed to go back into an organization, to take everything I learned from 10 years of consulting work, my graduate programs, and my research, and see whether I could actually make a strong leadership culture happen within a company.

Has Anyone Noticed That We've Stopped Talking about Our Values?

I never would have expected that my next opportunity would emerge so quickly. I was approached by a search firm to consider a role with a new start-up pharmaceutical company. The CEO, John, was an industry veteran. He had left a senior marketing job with a top-tier pharmaceutical company to start this new venture. He had a vision for creating a different kind of pharmaceutical company.

John had a great vision for the culture he wanted to create. The culture attracted me to the company. I decided to make the leap and became responsible for leading the learning and leadership function. It was a great experience with a great group of people. I had the opportunity that I was looking for: to go into a company and put my ideas into action. The good news was that John wasn't looking for the same old ways of working.

As a new company, we were pushing ourselves to think and act differently in all areas of our business. One of the things John taught me was a very subtle and important insight about leadership. John always believed that many leaders never really understand how a company actually makes money. He thought that was the cornerstone of all leadership, because once you understand that basic fundamental, it then drives all your behavior as a leader. That's when I began to learn about the deep connection between strategy and leadership.

Over the three years I was there, a subtle change took place in the conversations we had about our company. In the early days, we spent a lot of time talking about our values and the kind of culture we wanted to

create. We were very successful at doing that. But then we stopped having those discussions.

Once in an all-staff meeting I shared my personal observation, “Has anyone noticed that we’ve stopped talking about our values?” It was a question that resonated with many. What I would learn later when I was back in consulting was that organizations do this all the time. Values and culture are closely connected to each other. Companies sometimes treat them as a project, something to be checked off the list. I would see this faulty thinking over and over again. Culture building isn’t a one-time project or a simple to-do item; it’s never-ending. You have to constantly work on it. If you don’t, it will begin to erode.

Although my experience at this company was great and my team and I accomplished some good things, as the leader of a support function, I still felt one step removed from the core of the business. In just three years, I had already started to move into maintenance mode, and I knew that wasn’t where I excelled. It was time to move on.

All along, the spirit of Zinta was still present as my inspiration. Then the chance I was really looking for finally arrived. I joined another consulting firm that was soon acquired by a new company called Knightsbridge Human Capital Solutions.

How Do You Create a Vibrant Culture?

David was the founder and CEO of Knightsbridge—a seasoned business leader who had a strong track record as a corporate CEO. David had an idea: He wanted to give organizations a more integrated way to address their human capital needs at every stage—from recruitment, selection, and talent attraction to employee and leadership development.

In addition, David stressed the importance of not only building a great professional services firm but also becoming a great operating company. This dual part of our vision created a healthy tension in our organization. David and the rest of the Knightsbridge employees were committed to making this goal a reality.

David also talked about building a vibrant company culture. He knew that would be critical to our success. And I knew that my vision of an integrated leadership practice would help play a role in making his

overall vision a reality. I had found my opportunity to be the leader and put all my ideas about leadership and culture in place both within my business and externally with our clients.

In every organization, culture is both what binds you together and what propels you forward—but only if you get it right. If you don't, your culture becomes your fatal flaw. For a professional services business like Knightsbridge, culture has a real impact on the customer's experience. We defined our cultural uniqueness as our "K-Factor." It described our culture and the kind of employees who succeeded in our organization. It's what galvanized us. It's what made the organization special.

I held several roles of increasing responsibility in the early years. Then in July 2008, I was given the opportunity I was looking for: I was asked to lead a new Leadership Practice. My job was to integrate three separate businesses and redefine how we went to market. It was a great opportunity, and I immediately noticed something in me begin to change. As an executive, I now felt a greater sense of responsibility and accountability—more than at any other time in my career. I felt a direct obligation to our shareholders and board. I felt an even greater sense of accountability to our customers and employees. I was thrilled to have such an exciting opportunity to take on. I also knew it would take hard work to succeed.

But something happened in July of that year that would truly test my leadership—the financial crisis of 2007–2008.

As you might imagine, this was a very stressful time for all leaders in our client organizations. Knightsbridge fared well because our business model was tested and it was strong. Having a holistic business model with a collection of practice areas that can survive changes in economic cycles was a significant benefit for us. It was part of David's vision for the company and it worked.

It was also a big personal test for me. I learned that as a leader, you personally need resilience and resolve in difficult times. Not only do you need to manage your own reactions in those situations, but you also need to manage those of your team. And in our case, we also needed to be there for our clients in their time of need.

It was our collective obligation.

We stood by those who were struggling to deal with the fallout of the financial crisis. Many of our clients lost their jobs. Our career transition and outplacement services helped these clients in their time of need.

Others who managed to keep their jobs were working hard to make sure their companies remained intact during the crisis.

We also learned that many of our clients, particularly those who were new executives, had led only in good economic times. For them, this was their first experience leading through what would be one of the toughest economic periods in history. Our services became invaluable as we supported our clients through the crisis. I was proud of my colleagues and the impact they had on our clients during this difficult period.

Finally, what was fundamentally important to us was an idea I always believed in strongly: We couldn't just preach this leadership stuff; we needed to live it ourselves. We needed to work both to become great leaders and to model great leadership when working with our clients. If we did, they would notice and feel the difference. I believe we achieved this goal because we were able to build a strong leadership culture within my team. The other lesson is that building a strong leadership culture isn't just a destination you arrive at. You must remain committed in your efforts to sustain it.

How Do You Lead through Ambiguity?

Early in 2015, a new chapter in my personal leadership story began to unfold. Knightsbridge was acquired by The Adecco Group and Lee Hecht Harrison (LHH), global leaders in talent acquisition, development, and career transition.

This is the second time that I have worked for a company that was acquired. I have also been the acquirer and know at a personal level the impact these kinds of events have on employees and leaders.

Consolidation, mergers, and acquisitions have become commonplace in many industries. We've worked with many clients in these situations, and I find the first leadership challenge is to deal with all the ambiguity and uncertainty that arises. Leaders need to be exceptional at it, and if they aren't, then things break down quickly.

Now I found myself in the same situation as so many of my clients. In our case, the acquisition was a positive event. But even in our situation, there was ambiguity and a sense of disruption for employees and customers.

Customers want to be reassured that their world won't change. As a leader, you must communicate frequently to your customers and maintain high levels of service.

Employees always have varied reactions. Some will be upbeat and positive. Others will be concerned about their jobs and careers. All these reactions are legitimate and need to be addressed head-on by leaders.

The important thing to remember is that in all this ambiguity and change, you have an obligation to lead. During periods of uncertainty, everyone instinctively looks to the leaders for cues. The tone you set can either help or hinder how everyone else reacts. If you're running around fretting, it's quite likely your employees will do the same. On the other hand, if you project confidence and reassurance, this will be contagious as well.

But there's more. We evolved from being part of a privately held company to being part of a publicly held Fortune Global 500 firm. The Adecco Group is headquartered in Zurich, Switzerland, and has more than 33,000 full-time employees in sixty countries. The company is the world's leading provider of workforce solutions, transforming the world of work through talent and technology.

Six months after the acquisition took place, I was asked to take on a global role to help drive compelling thought leadership in the market. I also established a leadership transformation team to help organizations build the accountable leadership they need to succeed in a world of change, disruption, and ambiguity. This role represented another unique challenge in my own unfolding leadership story.

How Do You Transform Your Leaders?

I was given a tremendous opportunity to share the ideas in this book with leaders around the world. I spoke at close to one hundred events with customers, at conferences, and in small dinners with senior human resources executives and C-suite leaders. As I traveled in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia, I found myself running up against significant leadership stories that were unfolding in every part of the world. These events pointed to the significant leadership challenges faced by many companies and countries.

I spent a lot of time in the United States, as Donald Trump was being elected president after a campaign in which both he and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton achieved infamy for being among the least popular politicians ever to vie for the White House. I traveled to thirty U.S. cities, and during the election, everyone I talked to asked “How did we get here?” After the election, many I spoke to asked “What are we going to do now?” I could sense the anguish and uncertainty in their voices. Others saw it as an opportunity for change.

Then I had an extraordinary and unexpected experience on another business trip. I arrived one Sunday morning in March, in São Paulo, Brazil, South America’s largest country. Soon after my flight landed, I came to learn that millions of Brazilians were in the streets protesting and showing their disgust for government corruption. President Dilma Rousseff was eventually impeached amidst corruption allegations. Her successor, Michel Temer, was in the job less than six months before he too was drawn into a corruption scandal involving illegal payments from engineering companies looking for government work. In my discussions with Brazilian business leaders, I could tell they were deeply uncertain about the future of their country.

I also spent a week in Colombia, just weeks after Colombians voted to reject a peace deal between the government and former rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc). The deal took over four years to negotiate and would have ended five decades of war. The country was shocked at the failure of the deal, and people were left surprised and uncertain about how to move forward.

I traveled through the United Kingdom soon after the shocking decision to leave the European Union. The “Brexit” vote not only rocked international markets, but it also led to a rash of political leaders’ resignations—many of the anti-EU leaders and British Prime Minister David Cameron. Many Brits were stunned and are still feeling their way through the transition.

I was also in Italy, launching the Italian translation of my book, just before Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi resigned after his citizens rejected a series of constitutional reforms in a referendum. The resignation has set off a political crisis in Italy, with no clear choice among other party leaders to form a government.

All these events provided me with a fascinating series of real-world lessons that helped me better understand how leaders around the world were making sense of what it truly means to be a leader.

I also learned that my research around leadership accountability, and the ideas in this book, were connecting with leaders in a profound way.

When I first set off for all my travels, I really didn't know what to expect. However, I was surprised and humbled to meet many great people who were fully committed to being truly accountable leaders. It was an honor to share my ideas, and I'm grateful they were so meaningful to so many. As an author and leadership adviser, that's the kind of impact you hope your ideas will have.

Still, I asked myself: Why were the ideas of the leadership contract resonating so much? As I traveled, I learned that many companies find themselves at critical inflection points. Fundamental changes in technology, markets, and demographics are forcing companies to transform themselves. And that kind of transformation must start with leaders.

Leadership transformation, then, is the work that companies must excel at if they hope to survive in the future. Interestingly, when I think about the best work that my teams and I have done in the past with our clients, it's always been with an organization looking to transform itself. We have rarely done what I call steady-state leadership development. Instead, we have always helped companies build truly accountable leaders during times of significant change and transformation.

Leading during transformation is not an easy task. I believe it represents the greatest leadership challenge that one can face. I believe more and more organizations in the future will need leaders who are agile and responsive—leaders who can quickly evolve and transform themselves so they can set the tone for the rest of the employees in their companies. Now as I run my own company again, my team and I remain committed to helping leaders be the best they can be and step up and be truly accountable at an individual, team, and organizational level.

Reflecting on My Leadership Story

I now reflect on my personal leadership story, I feel that I have been fortunate to have carried out Zinta's vision from all those years ago. I didn't realize it at the time, but Zinta was trying to start a transformation. She enlisted my help and we began to have some impact. But she ran out of time. She wasn't able to see the transformation she started to the end.

To make matters worse, she was trying to change an organization that didn't want to change. She worked in a toxic leadership culture.

I know I've been lucky to be part of organizations where growth and change were the expectation, and where we shared a collective aspiration to build a truly great organization. I never take this for granted, because I have learned over the years how rare this can be.

And that's the final lesson of my leadership story: Don't waste your time in an organization that doesn't deserve your investment. Remember Zinta. You aren't just investing your time or your career—you're investing your life.

As a leader, you need to determine whether your organization is worthy of that investment. If it is, then roll up your sleeves and get busy making it the best organization it can be. Your organization desperately needs you and your personal leadership. It needs you to make the leadership decision to become a truly accountable leader. It needs you to step up to your obligations as a leader. It needs you to tackle the hard work that you must do as a leader. It needs you to build a strong community of leaders so you can collectively transform it. Are you ready?

The Gut Check for Leaders—Your Personal Leadership Story

As you think about the ideas in this chapter, reflect on your answers to the following gut check questions:

1. What is your personal leadership story?
2. What critical leadership experiences have shaped you as a leader?
3. With whom can you share your personal leadership story?
4. How might you help a fellow leader better understand his or her own personal leadership story?