

CHAPTER 1

My Journey to Abundance Leadership

Your work is to discover your work and then with all your heart to give yourself to it.

—BUDDHA

One day I was in a conversation with a colleague about our families and work. As I described most of my immediate family's jobs and professions, I realized that all of us worked for ourselves. I hadn't thought much about that conversation until I started writing this book and thinking about leadership and how hard leading is. Because of these discussions with my family and the reasons for their self-employment, I became aware of how hard it is to lead in a way that makes work fulfilling for others, and why the Abundance Leadership model emerged from my work experience and my educational journey.

To help myself better understand how I came to think about why an Abundance mental model could be a driving force in good leaders, I reflected on my own work journey to my role today, as a partner at Organizational Performance Group (OPG). Similar to many of you readers, I started work early, at the age of 12, with babysitting and small tasks for neighbors and friends of my parents.

In my mid-teens I had two jobs that have always stayed with me. The first was flipping burgers in a small burger shack at the beach where I grew up, Muir Beach (see Figure 1.1). The burger shack was in a converted trailer. There was often only one of us working at a time. Whoever was there would not only make the burgers but also take the cash, make the milkshakes, clean the counters, and more. I had to serve in all roles at different moments.



FIGURE 1.1 Laura at the window of the burger shack at Muir Beach in 1974, age 15.

SOURCE: Laura Freebairn-Smith (Author).

I remember the burger shack boss being very trusting and gone quite often. I cannot visualize him any longer, but I remember the general effect of being left on my own, which felt both good and a little worrisome.

This ability to develop staff members, sometimes by pushing them to the edge of discomfort, shows up in the Abundance Leadership model.

The second job that I had as a teenager was working in a factory that produced goods for head shops, for about \$1.65/hour. For those of you who are too young to know what a head shop is, it was a store that sold things like roach clips, bongs, rolling papers, posters, and other 1960s and 1970s weed and hippie paraphernalia. This factory produced the roach clips, the bongs, and other items sold in such shops. The factory took up about half a floor of a big building in the industrial area of Sausalito, one of the towns in Northern California where I grew up. The boss was an older man who was neither curmudgeonly nor nice as I recall; he was matter of fact and focused on productivity. I started out filling orders for stores, walking among the shelves full of bins of paraphernalia.

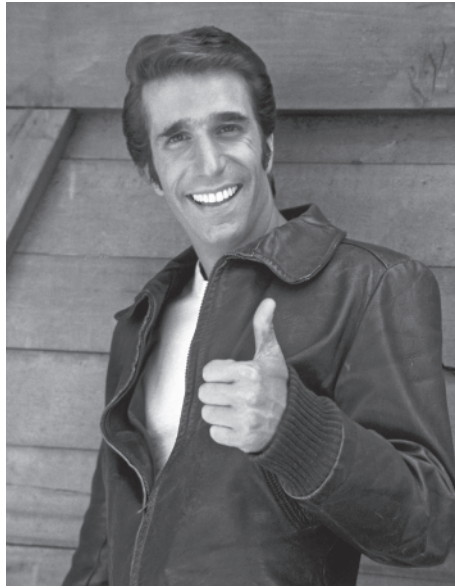


FIGURE 1.2 Henry Winkler as Fonzi.

SOURCE: AA Film Archive/Allstar Picture Library Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.

One day the factory got an order to roll thousands of Fonzi posters (see Figure 1.2). If you've ever bought a poster, it probably came rolled up in a long, thin plastic bag. There is a special machine for rolling posters and putting them in those plastic bags (see Figure 1.3). You sit on a stool and use a foot lever to cause a long metal bar to spin. The bar is right above your lap. The stack of unrolled posters is on the other side of the bar. You take a poster and begin wrapping it around the bar and then, guiding the poster with your hand, you step on the foot lever that activates the rod to roll. Once the poster is rolled, you take a plastic bag and pull it over the end of the rod and the poster. Slide the poster off the rod into the bag. Tuck the end of the plastic bag into the top of the poster and put the completed poster into a box.

I was so fast at rolling Fonzi posters, which were being sold at the local Safeway store, that the boss promoted me into the glass-blowing shop where bongos were made. I learned how to make glass bongos in the last few months of that job. I can't remember why I stopped working

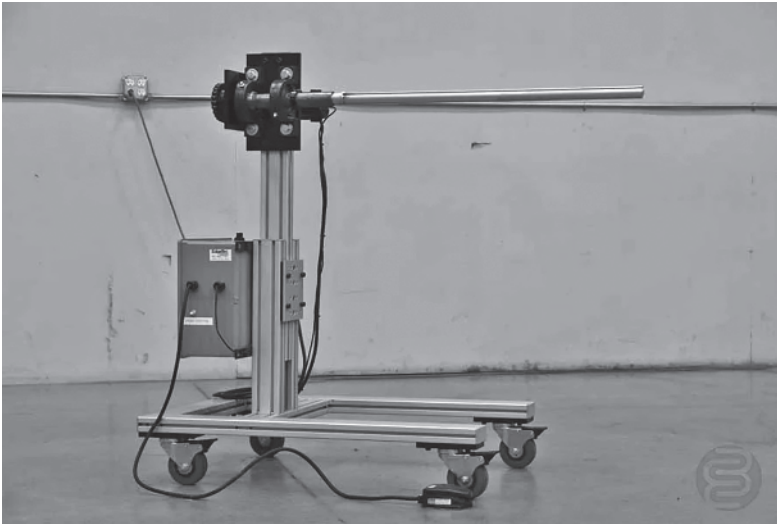


FIGURE 1.3 Pedal-operated poster rolling machine.

SOURCE: Boggs Equipment.

there; maybe it was a summer job. What has stuck with me through the years were the promotions for being productive. I remember so clearly the pride I took in being the fastest and being promoted. Celebration, reward, and recognition are also key techniques for Abundance leaders.

I had many other odd jobs during my early years. Similar to many students, I waitressed for a summer and fall semester at a restaurant near Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. I would work on the weekends while I was attending UC Berkeley. On occasion I would work the overnight shift, which was one of my favorites. I loved the early morning customers, some of them fishermen heading out onto the Bay to fish. I also loved bringing home apple pie to my father's apartment in San Francisco where I was staying and eating it with him right before I would go to bed, and he would head off to work.

The restaurant was a non-unionized environment. At some point the union was conducting an organizing effort and the staff members were asked to go out on strike, which we did. It was my first time becoming a union member and the only time I would walk a picket line. I would become a union member again much later when I was a professor at

Central Connecticut State University. This early experience with walking a picket line and unionization was an integral part of my education and evolution as a leader.

Unions and picket lines would reappear in my first weeks at Yale, when the clerical and technical staff members went out on strike just as the fall semester started in my first year of graduate school. I have complex opinions about unions that are not the topic of this book. Suffice it to say, I think they are essential in some industries, and I think they need to transform the way they work with management in other industries.

Abundance leaders are thinking about bigger societal and environmental issues such as income equality, empowering workers, and other matters that will improve the world, not just their own lives.

The next significant work memory I have is a very short stint I did as a business manager for a construction firm in Oakland right after I graduated from Berkeley, while I was waiting to head to Asia that fall. This was another piece in the leadership mosaic of my work life that produced the Abundance Leadership model.

At the construction company, the entire workforce was male; it was 1980 after all. I don't begrudge the context of history; it is what it was. One of the remarkable things about this job was the thinly veiled sexualized photographs on the walls of the office. The owner was an amateur photographer who took pictures with soft filters of scantily clothed women. Similar to many women of my age, we learned how to navigate a sexually fraught environment. That is not the topic of this book, but I will say that sexual overtures, physical touching, and more were common in my work experience until the late 1990s.

Abundance leaders work hard to ensure that their staff members feel safe and work in non-abusive conditions, the definitions of which are in constant flux and evolution.

I left the job in Oakland to go trekking in the Solo-Khumbu region of Nepal to the base camp of Everest with my mother. The trip was a graduation gift from her. Although not a work-related experience, two events during that trek would inform my thinking about leadership in the coming years.

There were 25 of us on that trek—a large group. In Nepal in the high Himalayas, there are no roads once you get above a certain altitude, and the trails are narrow. By the end of each day, the person at the front of the line could be two to three hours ahead of the person at the back of the line. Our trek leader was a young woman named Meredith. She

had a habit of moving up and down the line all day long. She always made sure that she or a Sherpa was with the last person in line. She had a marvelous quiet, steady presence that was very reassuring—always making sure the last person had support. We use this method of leading, attending to all, in the Abundance Leadership immersion program during one of the experiential exercises. This method of leading is important in day-to-day work as well.

The second event on that trek that changed my internal relationship to service and leading was when I contracted pneumonia at 10,000 feet. Most days I was one of the first into camp because of my age—I was the youngest at 21. One day I found that it was getting harder and harder to breathe. I would walk 100 steps and have to sit down. I arrived into camp two to three hours after the last person, accompanied by my mother and a Sherpa. That night I had a high fever; the doctor on the trek came to our tent and gave me a shot of antibiotics. The next morning, I was still very sick.

That day, the Sherpas created a way to carry me on their backs, using a tumpline and a stick (see Figure 1.4). A Sherpa would carry me for 20 minutes, and then pass me to another Sherpa. Up in the Himalayas,



FIGURE 1.4 A woman carries firewood using a tumpline.

SOURCE: Sergey Pashko / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 3.0.

there is very little flat ground. We were going up and down all day. The Sherpas were always polite and kind and never made me feel like a burden, which I clearly was both literally and figuratively. The Sherpas were moving so fast that the doctor fell and broke his wrist while trying to keep up with us. I remember crying on the backs of the Sherpas out of humility and gratitude. It was a wonderful teaching about what service means, a teaching that would serve me well in my work in the refugee camps. A core competency of Abundance leaders is the ability to express kindness and compassion easily.

I left Nepal and flew to Bangkok. Serving as the education coordinator for the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in the refugee camps, Khao-I-Dang (Figure 1.5) and Sakaeo, was my next job, and one of my most profound work experiences. My first boss in Khao-I-Dang, Dan Steinbock, gave me significant responsibility for a 21-year-old. He saw potential in my energy and focus. As a result, I moved from an education assistant position to education coordinator (the American equivalent of



FIGURE 1.5 Cambodian refugee at work in Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in the early 1980s.

SOURCE: Laura Freebairn-Smith (Author).



FIGURE 1.6 Office entry sign in Khao-I-Dang refugee camp.

SOURCE: Laura Freebairn-Smith (Author).

school superintendent) in about a year and a half (Figures 1.6 and 1.7). By the time I left Thailand, I was supervising 10 or so Thai and expatriate staff members and more than 1,000 Cambodian staff members. In Khao-I-Dang, the education program served more than 20,000 refugees, with 13 primary schools, kindergartens, an arts center, the only Cambodian printing press in the world at that time, a woodworking training program, and more (see Figure 1.8).

As education coordinator, I reported to an IRC boss in Bangkok, a four-hour drive away. I frequently reported to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representatives in Bangkok as well, so my bosses were somewhat remote. This pattern of self-management or hands-off supervision would become a pattern in my life. Toward the end of my four years working on the border, I began to experience burnout and frustration. I knew I needed to make a change.

After Thailand and the refugee camps, I left to attend Yale to get my MBA. My summer internship, done between the two years of the MBA program, was at the World Bank creating spreadsheets that would predict the cost of building hospitals in Nigeria. My two supervisors were



FIGURE 1.7 Children in class in Khao-I-Dang refugee camp.

SOURCE: Laura Freebairn-Smith (Author).

gone most of the internship. My memory is not completely accurate, but I think I saw them maybe four to five times that summer, so I was left to my own devices to sit in an office and stare at Excel spreadsheets for the summer. This was another moment in my life when my boss was not particularly present. There are pros and cons to this hands-off/absentee leadership, but I missed being part of a team.

Abundance leaders look to build teams, ensuring that everyone feels included.

After Yale I got a job as a chief operating officer for a very small non-profit. I was not a good personality fit with the two leaders, who had a particularly symbiotic relationship. There is literature about triads as a problematic configuration, with triangulation occurring. I think that was part of the problem, as was just a general difference of personalities and my own professional immaturity. I was just beginning to gain a much more sophisticated view of organizational life.

Being aware of team dynamics, and one's relationships' impact on those around you, is a highly advanced skill in Abundance Leadership.



FIGURE 1.8 Laura with her Cambodian staff in Khao-I-Dang refugee camp.

SOURCE: Laura Freebairn-Smith (Author).

I then became the managing director of the Gesell Institute in New Haven (see Figures 1.9 and 1.10). The day that I started the job, at the age of 28, I found the following items on my desk or in my inbox: a note from the bookkeeper saying there was not enough cash for payroll, the resignation letter of the executive director, a bank statement showing that much of the endowment funds had been depleted, and three or four other critical items that put the organization in jeopardy. When I teach leadership, sometimes I use that inbox as a case study.

Over the next two years, I would spend my time helping the Institute go from 67 staff members down to 5, working myself out of a job as well. Ultimately, 30 years later, the Institute has become part of Yale and is now on solid ground again, thanks to new leadership.

That work at the Institute was what I would call my third master's degree: my first being the work in the refugee camps, and my second being my MBA from Yale. At the Institute, I worked with the executive



FIGURE 1.9 Institute's offices at 310 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT.

SOURCE: Tzurin/Wikimedia Commons.



FIGURE 1.10 Dr. Arnold Gesell.

SOURCE: Herbert Gehr/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock.com.

director who had resigned for the first two weeks of my job. I then worked with a board member who stepped in as executive director but was asked to step down shortly afterwards due to a variety of issues with his leadership. Last, I reported directly to the board as the Institute got smaller and smaller.

The complexities of closing down a 40-year-old institution that was failing long before I showed up provided lessons in ownership, leadership, group dynamics, theft, anger, and being misrepresented in the press. I remember a quote in the local paper being attributed to me but the quote was something that a former leader had said. That was an early lesson in misrepresentation in the public sphere. In a crisis,

Abundance leaders work hard to stay calm and unruffled. I can't say I succeeded at this at such a young age but this situation gave me a great deal of early practice.

The Gesell Institute job was another work situation in which I had intermittent bosses, no bosses, and semi-effective bosses. As this pattern of working without a consistent or nearby boss continued, I began to realize that it suited me to be my own boss, and the pattern was stimulating my thinking about leadership.

After my work at Gesell, I started my first consulting firm, Good Work Associates (GWA), which I ran for 10 years. In the ninth year, I told my business partner that I needed to step down and see what I wanted to do next. One of my last consulting jobs at GWA was to do a whitepaper for Peter Vallone, the head of human resources at Yale at that time.

Peter asked me to do some research and benchmarking on what a good organizational development (OD) department or function at Yale might be. I did the research for him and presented a paper that looked at what Harvard and other Ivy League institutions were doing in the OD arena, as well as places like Disney. I presented my findings and suggested that Yale start an organizational development unit. They created the unit and a position for an organizational development lead.

Peter asked me if I wanted the job. I initially declined because I was not yet sure if I wanted to continue in the field of OD or where I wanted to work. After some negotiating, I said yes to the job. Peter turned out to be one of the best bosses I have had in my career. I had a boss whom I got along with, and respected, and who deeply respected my expertise. I had had some of those attributes in prior bosses but not all of them in one boss. It was working with Peter and other leaders at Yale that were the nutrients that brought the seeds of Abundance Leadership to life.

I remember asking Peter once if he wanted to attend a meeting with the provost with me. He said, “Why would I do that? You’re the expert.” He had another phrase that enabled him to delegate while also calling his staff members to pay attention to what they were doing and when and how to keep him informed, but not micro-managing us. He would say, “I don’t want to read something in the headlines that I don’t know about.” This was such a good guideline for making decisions and for keeping him informed. Peter retired in my fourth year in that position.

Abundance Leaders grow staff in many ways, including delegation.

There were many other people and experiences at Yale that informed my view of leadership and gave me inspiration for what women can do as leaders. Two women stand out to me: Linda Lorimer and Alison Richard. Linda was the secretary for the university. This role is not that of administrative assistant but serves as a critical strategic advisor to the president. This role oversees the board of trustees among other major committees and functions. Richard Levin, president of Yale at that time, trusted Linda deeply. She was energetic, dedicated to Yale, and visionary. And, she was action-oriented and decisive.

I went to see her about some funding to revise new employee orientation. I came prepared with all kinds of documents, analysis, and other items to support the need for extra funding. She asked me one or two questions, asked how much I needed, and said fine. The entire meeting took 15 minutes. It was delightful!

The other leader who left a lasting impression on me was Alison Richard, then provost of Yale. She would go on to become the first female vice chancellor of Cambridge University. She was always calm, available, and thorough. Standing barely 5 feet tall, she never lacked gravitas or presence. Her quiet and calm demeanor grounded the entire room. She and I worked on a few initiatives together, and in hindsight I imagine I seemed overly energetic and somewhat unformed as a professional to her, even though I was in my late 30s. But she never made me feel that way. I felt that she trusted me, my competence, and my expertise. She was lovely to work with, and when she left for Cambridge, I felt that a critical piece of my pantheon of stars that supported my work at Yale was gone.

Both Linda and Alison modeled Abundance Leadership behaviors of decisiveness and being calm and unruffled.

I had other experiences as the leader of the Learning Center at Yale that continue to inform my view of what worked and didn’t work as a leader. One of those experiences was the day the twin towers fell. I was

six months pregnant with my second son, sitting in a meeting with the university librarian, when a worker came in and said that one of the twin towers had been hit by a jet. We were dismayed and concerned but we assumed it was a one-off accident, as so many people all over the world did until 40 minutes later when the second plane hit the other tower.

The worker came back in and told us about the second tower. After a short huddle, I set off on foot across campus to get back to my office to gather my 20 or so staff members I had at that time. We gathered in one of the conference rooms and we talked about what had just happened and spent a very brief period processing our fear and our emotions. At the end of that discussion, I told everyone to go home. I did not consult with my boss or with the university policy or with anyone else. I trusted my intuition and my instinct, and I knew that everyone needed to go get their children, find their partners, and be with their families because we had no idea what was happening to the country at that moment.

Abundance leaders display compassion and are decisive, especially in a crisis.

Another experience at Yale that highlighted an Abundance Leadership behavior involved staff members' acute awareness of my affect. While I was at Yale, after Peter Vallone had retired, the new VP of HR told us that we needed to downsize. All of the HR directors, of which I was one, and the VP would meet regularly in a building across the street from my office. I found out later that my staff members would wait at the window, watching as I would return from these meetings to see what my physical and facial affect were. They were trying to see if it was good news or bad news.

As the Abundance Leadership model articulates later in this book, our awareness of our physical and facial affect is a critical part of being a good leader. This moment at Yale was an early lesson in that insight.

Another experience at Yale, that shows up as a behavior in the Abundance Leadership model, is advocating for your staff members in a variety of settings. I remember sitting in a meeting at Yale talking about an open position for which an African American staff member was qualified to move up into. Recently three other positions had been given to white staff members without requiring an interview process. In that particular meeting, it was suggested that the African American staff member should go through an interview process. I objected, pointing out that the three white staff members had been appointed without even a review of a résumé as far as I knew. The conversation came to a dead stop and the decision was made to give the African American staff member the position.

The last experience I had at Yale that I want to share was the catalyst for my conducting research on and creating the Abundance Leadership model. During my last year or so at Yale, I worked with John Pepper, the former CEO of Procter & Gamble. He is a Yale alum and was recently retired. President Levin had asked him to come back to Yale for a few years to help modernize some of the administrative functions.

John was a dedicated organizational development fan, having seen the positive impact of organizational development work at Procter & Gamble. He and I hit it off immediately. Again, I felt deeply respected for my energy, competence, and expertise.

One of the most salient memories I have of John's deep kindness and humility is when we were walking down a hallway at Yale on the way to a meeting. We came across a service and maintenance worker pushing a cart of cleaning supplies. John, although running slightly late for the meeting, stopped to speak to the service and maintenance worker. John introduced himself, asked the worker their name, and asked how their work was going and what they needed to do their job better. It was such a great moment with no artifice. John followed up later and made sure the worker knew that their suggestions had been acted on. The sensation of working with John was that anything was possible. He became one of the sources of inspiration for Abundance Leadership.

I stayed another three years at Yale, after Peter left, with bosses who were not great fits for me as I came to realize that my relentlessly challenging and entrepreneurial stance can feel antagonistic to people who supervise me. After seven years in my role as director of the Organizational Development and Learning Center, and declining a higher-level role at Yale, I once again resumed consulting, five years later merging my consulting firm with Tony Panos's firm, to create OPG. Along the way, I completed my doctorate, producing the Abundance Leadership model through my research.

Each work experience, combined with exceptional teachers and educational opportunities, led me to conceive of the Abundance Leadership model. These experiences also helped me be a better resource for my clients, my staff members, my community, and my family.

I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on your own journey, and see where Abundance behaviors and values have already appeared, and where you might bring them more fully into your life and work.

