

THE TRANSFORMATION FROM “I” TO “WE”

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We’ve all seen the traits in our bosses, subordinates, and colleagues: leaders who have the right skills, use the latest management tools, articulate the right messages with the most popular buzzwords, and hone the right strategies. But underneath something seems to be missing. Followers respond with caution because these leaders always seem to be promoting themselves. Supervisors are worried, but can’t pin down what’s wrong. Even concerned friends keep their distance. While all the pieces seem to be there, these leaders are never able to rally enthusiastic support from their teams. Leadership, it seems, involves more than a set of skills. But what?

For the last several years, with the full engagement of our colleagues Peter Sims and Diana Mayer, we have been investigating leadership development from the ground up and the top down, culminating with a study of 125 authentic leaders known for their success, effectiveness, and integrity. (This research forms the basis for Bill George’s new book, *True North: Discover Your*

Authentic Leadership, written with Peter Sims.) We sought to answer the question, What propels leaders as they move from being individual contributors to effective, authentic leaders?

In these in-person interviews, which averaged 75 minutes in length, we asked leaders to tell us the reasons for their success and how they developed as leaders. What we learned came as a big surprise. Contrary to the competence-based approaches to leadership development of the past three decades, these leaders did not cite any characteristics, styles, or traits that led to their success. In fact, they preferred *not* to talk about their success at all. Instead, they focused on their life stories, and the people and experiences that shaped them as leaders. We learned that their stories had ups and downs, and that many of them had to overcome great personal difficulties en route to becoming successful leaders—difficulties that made the business challenges they faced pale by comparison. What nearly all of these leaders had in common was a transformative passage through which they recognized

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that leadership was not about their success at all. As a consequence of their experiences, they realized that leadership is not about getting others to follow them. Rather, they gained the awareness that the essence of their leadership is aligning their teammates around a shared vision and values and empowering them to step up and lead. For some of these leaders the difficult experiences occurred at a young age, but it took a triggering event many years later to cause them to reframe their experiences and find their calling to lead authentically.

“When you become a leader, your challenge is to inspire others, develop them, and create change through them,” Jaime Irick, a West Point alumnus and emerging leader at General Electric, explained to us. “You’ve got to flip that switch and understand that it’s about serving the folks on your team.”

We call this the transformation from “I” to “We.”

The Long Journey to Transformation

Leaders we studied began their careers with a primary focus on themselves—their performance, achievements, and rewards. As they entered the world of work, they envisioned themselves in the image of an all-conquering hero, able to change the world for the better. As shown in Figure 1, this first phase of the leadership development journey usually lasts from birth until around 30. For most leaders, the first three decades of their lives are spent gathering experience, skills, and relationships before leadership opportunities present themselves.

One might think that the archetypal hero would be a natural model for an organization’s leader. Yet in our in-

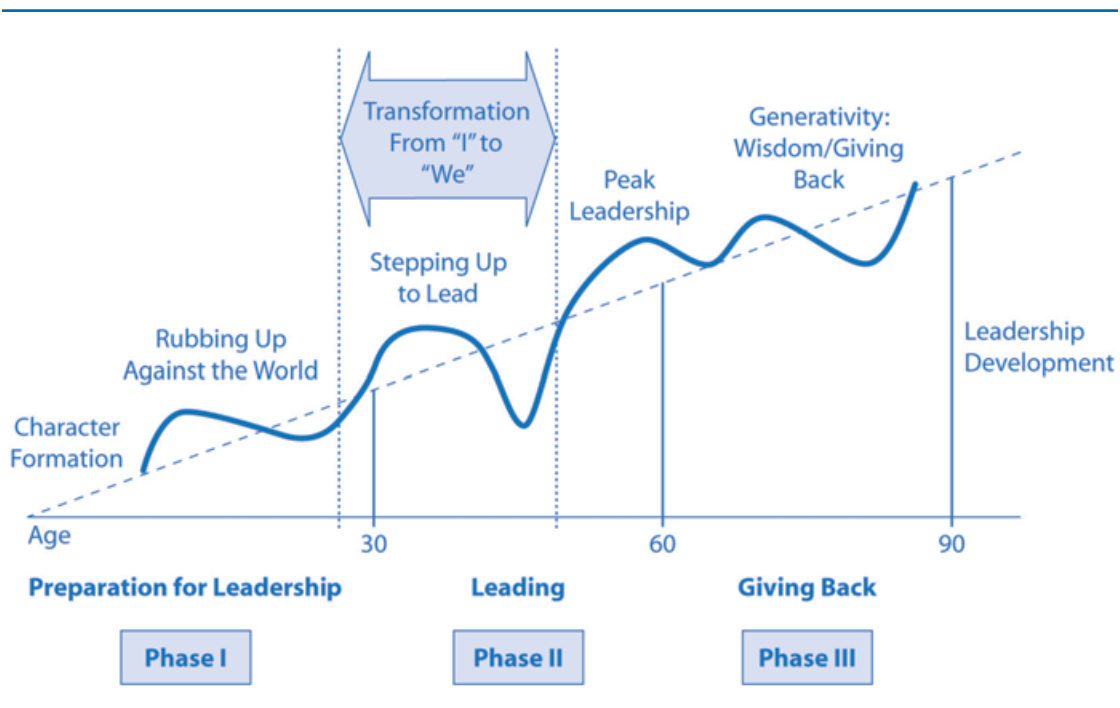


FIGURE 1. THE TRANSFORMATION FROM “I” TO “WE”

interviews with authentic leaders, the hero role turned out to be representative only of their early development. Initially, doing impressive deeds, facing challenges alone, and gaining notice—the hero’s job—seemed the best route to success. This is a perfectly natural embarkation point for leaders. After all, so much early success in life depends upon individual efforts, from grades earned in school to performance in individual sports to initial jobs. Admissions offices and employers examine those achievements most closely and use them to make comparisons.

That stage is useful, but many find it hard to move beyond it. As leaders are promoted from individual roles to management, they can start to believe they are being recognized for their ability to get others to follow. “We spend our early years trying to be the best,” says Irick. “To get into West Point or General Electric, you have to be the best. That is defined by what you can do on your own—your ability to be a phenomenal analyst or consultant or do well on a standardized test.”

In spite of the rewards for heroic performance, most leaders we interviewed reached a point on their journeys when their way forward was blocked or their worldview was turned upside down. They found that their journey was not following the straight ascending path in Figure 1, but more resembled the ups and downs traced around it. Their successes were mirrored by challenges as dips followed the highs.

It was the lessons from the difficult periods that seeded the transformation from “I” to “We.” Success reinforces what leaders do at an early stage. Challenges force them to rethink their approach. At some point, all leaders have to rethink what their life and leadership are all about. They may start to question: “Am I good

enough?” “Why can’t I get this team to achieve the goals I have set forth?” Or they may have a personal experience that causes them to realize that there is more to life than getting to the top.

It is crucial to emphasize that Figure 1 is one idealized depiction of the course and timing of the transformation from “I” to “We.” In the examples that follow, readers will note first that a transformative experience may come at any point in a leader’s life.

For some, the transformation from “I” to “We” results from the positive experience of having a wise mentor or a unique opportunity at a young age. But as much as we all want positive experiences like these, transformations for most leaders result from going through a crucible. In *Geeks and Geezers*, Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas describe the concept of the crucible as an experience that tests leaders to their limits. A crucible can be triggered by events such as confronting a difficult situation at work, receiving critical feedback, or losing your job. Or it may result from a painful personal experience such as divorce, illness, or the death of a loved one.

Transformative Experiences in Leadership Development

The examples we present here, which we were given in the course of our interviews, show the many ways in which leaders can be transformed and that the process can sometimes be protracted. What they have in common is that the leaders each came face to face with the limits of what they had done before, and that they confronted the necessity to change. These limits can be experienced on or off the job and the necessity to change can be fostered by others or it may be purely existential.

Getting Tough Feedback

One of the hardest things for high-performance leaders to do is to see themselves as others see them. When they receive critical feedback, especially if it is unexpected, their first response tends to be defensive—to challenge the validity of the criticism or the critics themselves. If they can get past those feelings and process the criticism objectively, however, constructive feedback can trigger a fundamental reappraisal of their leadership.

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That's what Doug Baker Jr. learned when he was rising through the ranks of Minnesota-based Ecolab. After working in marketing in Germany for three years, Baker moved to North Carolina as deputy head of a newly acquired company. To integrate his team, Baker hired a coach to conduct 360-degree assessments and facilitate group sessions. "I elected to be first to go through the high-impact leadership program."

At 34, Baker saw himself as a fast-rising star, moving rapidly from one leadership role to the next. "I had become, frankly, fairly arrogant and was pushing my own agenda." Then he got the results from the 360-degree process, in which his colleagues told him all this and more. "It was a cathartic experience. I got a major dose of criticism I didn't expect," he said.

As part of this process, I went away for five days with a dozen strangers from different companies and shared my feedback with them. Since I had been so understanding in this session, I expected people to say, "How could your team possibly give you that feedback?" Instead, I got the same critical feedback from this new group.

It was as if someone flashed a mirror in front of me at my absolute worst. What I saw was horrifying, but it was also a great lesson. After that, I did a lot of soul-searching about what kind of leader I was going to be. I talked to everyone on my Ecolab team about what I had learned, telling them, "Let's have a conversation. I need your help."

Meanwhile, Baker's division was challenged by a larger

competitor who threatened to take away its business with McDonald's, which accounted for the bulk of its revenues. When he forecast a significant shortfall from his financial plan, the corporate CEO traveled to North Carolina to find out what was going on. Asked by the CEO to commit to saving the McDonald's business and getting back on plan, Baker refused to give him any assurances. This raised the CEO's ire, but Baker held his ground. Reflecting on his candor in confronting his powerful leader, Baker commented, "I'd rather have a bad meeting than a bad life."

If we had lost McDonald's, it would be embarrassing for me, but it was all these folks in the plant who were really going to be hurt. There was unemployment all over North Carolina as many factories were shutting down. If they don't have a job here, they don't have a job, period. Suddenly, you find the cause is a call to the heart. Saving the McDonald's account created a lot of energy and fortunately, we retained the business. It was a traumatic time, but ultimately a great learning experience for me.

Doug Baker's critical feedback came at just the right time. On the verge of becoming overly self-confident and thinking that leadership was about his success, the criticisms brought him back to earth. They enabled him to realize his role as a leader was to unite the people in his organization around a common purpose, and the challenge of saving the McDonald's account provided a rallying point for that unity. This experience paved the way for him to eventually become CEO of Ecolab.

Gail McGovern, a former telecommunications executive who is currently a business school professor, told of struggling with her leadership. "Within one month I went from being the best programmer to the worst supervisor that Bell of Pennsylvania had," she said.

It's unbelievable how bad I was. I didn't know how to delegate. When somebody would have a question about something they were working on, I'd pick it up and do it. My group was not accomplishing anything because I was on the critical path of everything. My boss and mentor saw that we were imploding and did an amazing thing. He gave me every new project that came in. It was unreal.

At 4:30 my team would leave, and I'd be working day and night trying to dig through this stuff.

Finally, I couldn't take it any longer. I went into his office and stamped my foot like a five-year-old. "It's not fair. I have the work of 10 people." He said calmly, "Look out there. You've got 10 people. Put them to work." It was such a startling revelation. I said sheepishly, "I get it."

As difficult as it is to take in, feedback provides the opportunity to make the transformation from focusing on ourselves to understanding how we can be effective motivators and leaders of others, just as Baker and McGovern did. This requires letting go and trusting others.

Hitting the Wall

Many leaders have an experience at work that dramatically tests their sense of self, their values, or their assumptions about their future or career. We call this "hitting the wall," because the experience resembles a fast-moving race car hitting the wall of the track—but it's something most rising leaders experience at least once in their careers.

General Electric CEO Jeff Immelt was a fast-rising star in his mid-30s when he faced his toughest challenge. Asked to return to GE's plastics business as head of world sales and marketing, he had reservations about accepting the move because it was not a promotion. Jack Welch told him, "I know this isn't what you want to do, but this is a time when you serve the company."

Facing stiff competition, the division had entered into several long-term fixed-price contracts with key customers, including U.S. automakers, when a spike of inflation sent the division's costs soaring. Immelt's operation missed its operating profit target by \$30 million, or 30 percent of its budget. He tried to increase prices, but progress was slow, as Immelt's actions caused the division's crucial relationship with General Motors to deteriorate.

This only intensified the pressure on Immelt to produce results and forced Welch to resolve the issues by talking to GM CEO Roger Smith. Welch did not hesitate to reach down to pepper Immelt with questions by phone. Immelt recalled the year as a remarkably difficult one until he and his team could start to turn the business around.

Nobody wants to be around somebody going through a low period. In times like that you've got to be able to draw from within. Leadership is one of these great journeys into your own soul.

Jeff Immelt was under enormous pressure to deliver immediate results, but he withstood the pressure to compromise and took the long-term course of getting the business back on track. Immelt's success in leading this turnaround prepared him to become Welch's successor, where he has faced much greater pressure but has stayed the course, holding to his beliefs and his strategy to build GE for the next decade.

Steve Rothschild was on the move at General Mills. He created the Yoplait yogurt business in the United States and put it on course to become a \$1 billion business. Promoted to executive vice president while still in his 30s, he faced many new challenges. After eight years in this role, Rothschild became restless. He felt like a man in the middle, missing the satisfaction of leading his own team. He also disagreed with the company's direction, judging it had to become more global. Rothschild faced up to the reality that he was marching to a different drummer and wasn't enjoying his work. After some reflection, he decided it was time to leave General Mills. "I was stuck in a job I no longer enjoyed. I needed to feel alive again," he said.

Using his own money, he founded Twin Cities RISE! Its mission is to provide employers with skilled workers by training unemployed and underemployed adults, especially African American men, for skilled jobs that pay a wage of at least \$20,000 per year with benefits.

Leaving General Mills was a godsend for me. It allowed me to explore things that were underneath my skin and in my soul and gave me the opportunity to refocus on my marriage and family. Since leaving,

*Transformations take
many forms.*

my relationships with my family have become much closer and deeper. Making this move has made me a more complete person, more fulfilled and happier.

Leaders react to experiences like these in one of three ways. They can remain stuck in their old ways and continue in their current positions, usually with negative consequences. Or the experience can be sobering as leaders like Immelt realize they are not superhuman and have to face difficult trials like everyone else. This enables them to be more empathic and empowering to the people around them. Finally, they may decide, as Steve Rothschild did, that fundamental changes are required in their lives and wind up pursuing different career directions. In either case, such a crucible provides the basis for the transformation from “I” to “We.”

Seeing Life Whole

When you meet Carlson Companies’ CEO Marilyn Carlson Nelson for the first time, you are struck by her warmth, her zest for life, and her optimism that any problem can be solved by inspiring people to step up and lead. Yet hers is a more complex story. As if it were yesterday, she vividly recalls learning the news of her daughter’s death. “My husband and I heard one morning that our beautiful 19-year-old Juliet had been killed in an automobile accident.”

That’s the most profound test we’ve ever had, a test of our faith and our personal relationship. I lost my faith at the time and felt angry with God. But God didn’t abandon me and didn’t let me go. I discovered how valuable every day is and how valuable each person is. I decided to make whatever time I had left meaningful so that time that Juliet didn’t have would be well spent. My husband and I vowed to use every tool at hand as an opportunity to give back or a way to make life better for people. They are all human beings with one short time on Earth.

Soon after her daughter’s death, Nelson joined Carlson Companies full-time, where she has devoted herself to empowering the organization’s 150,000 employees to serve its customers in a highly personalized manner. Twenty years later she remains dedicated to the vow she made to make life better for people. In 2006, she was named one

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of “America’s Best Leaders” by *U.S. News & World Report*.

Virgin Mobile USA CEO Dan Schulman described how his sister’s death transformed his attitudes toward leadership. “Before my sister died, I was focused on moving up in AT&T. I was upwardly oriented and insecure. Often I took credit that wasn’t mine to claim.”

My sister’s death was the first time I had been dealt a giant blow. I loved her immensely. When death happens so young and cuts a life short, a lot of things you thought were important aren’t important at all. When she died, I decided, “I am going to be who I am.” I wanted to spend more time with my folks and my brother, rather than moving up the corporate ladder.

At that point I didn’t care if I got credit for anything and became quick to credit everyone else. As team leader, I focused only on getting the job done in the best way. As a result, our teams became much more functional than they were before. All of a sudden, my career started to shoot up.

Both Nelson and Schulman used the trauma of the death of their loved ones to rethink what their lives and leadership were about. With a newfound sense of mission, they reoriented their leadership into focusing on others.

Guiding the Transformation

The transformation from “I” to “We” is the point where leaders step out of the hero’s journey and embark on the leader’s journey. Their crucible experiences cause lead-

ers to reorganize the meaning of their experience and make a commitment to goals larger than themselves.

The transformation can take many forms. In addition to breaking a leader out of the hero's journey, transformative experiences can also shape leaders' values, sense of compassion, sense of purpose, reliance on support networks, and commitment to self-discipline—all elements that are necessary to leaders' authenticity and effectiveness.

We single out the transition from “I” to “We” because that transformation stems from experiences that place leaders in the space of a powerful paradox. To recover from a life-changing setback requires the continued deployment of the competitive drive and skills that leaders have been working to master to that point. At the same time, their

experiences force them to be humble. This newfound humility stems from the recognition that leadership is not about them. This recognition propels them into the next stages of leadership development as the hero's journey is left behind and the leader's journey begins.

Only when leaders stop focusing on their personal ego needs are they able to develop other leaders. They feel less competitive with talented peers and subordinates and are more open to other points of view, enabling them to make better decisions. As they overcome their need to control everything, they learn that people are more interested in working with them. A lightbulb goes on as they recognize the unlimited potential of empowered leaders working together toward a shared purpose.



Bill George is professor of management practice at Harvard Business School and the former chairman and CEO of Medtronic. His latest book is “True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership,” written with Peter Sims. His earlier book, “Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secret to Creating Lasting Value,” was a Business Week best-seller and selected as one of the “Best Business Books of 2003 and 2004” by the Economist magazine. He serves on the boards of ExxonMobil, Goldman Sachs, and Novartis.



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