



**LEADERSHIP**  
*Thinking, Being, Doing*

New and Revised Edition

Lee Thayer

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*Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing*

New and Revised Edition

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For K.T., for every reason.

*As long as people exist, some will  
always strive for the best.  
And some will attain it.*

– Historian Barbara Tuchman



## Preface to the Revised Edition

No book is ever “finished.” Most could be improved upon indefinitely.

The first edition of *Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing* was probably somewhere around its 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> iteration. I was always thinking of better ways of doing it. And, since I am a rabid learner, it always seemed to me that the particular version of the manuscript I was working on was already superseded by what I had learned last week. In this sense, books are like still pictures. They reveal what your thinking was back then.

This case is different. The book is out there. It has had many readers, and lots of fans. They have told me, directly or indirectly, that it is not an easy book to read. The main reason of course is that it requires readers to read and to think in ways that they had forgotten – or never learned in the first place. There’s not much I can do about that one. People who are not superior readers and thinkers are not likely to become leaders anyway.

But the feedback illuminated some occasionally inadequate handling of key concepts, a few ambiguities, and some just plain counter-intuitive concepts. About these, something can be done.

So the book editor and I went through the book, from the first sentence to the last, and changed whatever needed changing to make the book and its sometimes contrarian concepts easier to comprehend. And to make it more obvious how they might be



implemented. What's "new and revised" is that the whole book has been re-edited, and rewritten if called for, based on reader feedback – *and* on the insights an author gains by distancing himself from the book for a period of time.

Perhaps the most obvious or notable improvements are that I have added at the end of each chapter a short list of "Points to Ponder." Not actually a summary of the chapter, but provocations for thinking about some of the main ideas in the chapter. Also added: an index, making it easier to find what you are looking for in the book when you want to revisit certain topics that you want to think more about.

My intention was not to make the book larger, but simply better. The basic concepts remain the same. In some cases better explained, but still the concepts that have been field-tested successfully many times. The improvements include, for example, better explanations of the way change evolves out of how compellingly the leader tells his or her story of the future; more on dumb vs. smart systems; why most of the "dragons" that impede our journey are internal; that the only way to really understand high-performance organizations is to make one; how the victim mentality seeps into organizations from the pop culture, and how that creates a kind of "corporate welfare"; more definitive explanations of why pre-packaged "recipes" don't work; and many more.

Some parts have been kept intact. Readers have dog-eared the page at the end of Chapter 1, "How to Have a Mediocre Organization." It's as if they've been there, done that. Once they "get it," readers have the feeling of being confronted by the blindingly obvious, even though they may at first have disagreed. Such revelations ensure their retention.

As it says here and there in this admittedly very unconventional book about making high-performance organizations (and what leadership has to do with that complex undertaking), what I know comes primarily from what I have learned doing it. There are the "trenches" in which I continue to work alongside my clients to



make it happen. And then there are the “trenches” involved in trying to learn how to describe it.

Neither will ever be perfectly done. Neither can be reduced to a recipe. But what I can guarantee you is this: that if you will work as hard at getting your head around this alien paradigm as I have in learning about it and trying to share that learning with you, you will be equipped to make a great organization. And to lead it in the extraordinary ways required.

I would like to make it easy. But it’s not. It is not easy to think about it rightly. And it is certainly not easy to do it. But every great journey has a base from which to go forth prepared. It is my intention that this revised edition of the book will provide just that for you.

Lee Thayer  
Flat Rock, NC  
January, 2007





# Executive Orientation

*Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing* ... you may be thinking a little explanation is in order.

Here it is: You can't learn to be a "leader." History decides that. All you can do is be prepared if you are "called" to provide leadership.

Leadership is a specific role in a specific ongoing story. The leader's role is to change the course of that story. Since you can't learn to be a leader as such, how do you change the course of the story? You can learn how to *perform* leadership, to *prepare* to fulfill that role, if it happens that you are called to fulfill a specific leadership role.

So, about the title: If you intend to equip yourself to provide leadership – when, where, and how it's needed – this is your comprehensive guidebook. How successful you can be depends upon how you think, because that determines who you are. And who you are determines how you will do what you do. Thus the title: *Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing*. If those three don't hang together rightly within you, your leadership won't amount to much.

There is no point in learning about leadership unless you have a *cause* that demands extraordinary performance. All the words about leadership ever written are worthless unless a great and worthy cause is at stake. This book is about high performance and the kind of leadership required to pursue a great and worthy cause.



You have been referred to this book, or drawn to it because there is nothing else that can provide you with all of the thinking, being, and doing tools you will need. You need to know not only what the territory looks like when you are traversing it, but the whys and the wherefores. The ideas and navigational tools provided here were forged in the trenches, working directly with the executives who were, and are, actively working to make it happen. Those tools come as well from many years of seeking out the best that has ever been said or written about the subject of leadership.

The only people who really understand what it takes are the people who have done it. These are the people who can effectively equip others to do it. I'm here before you after more than four decades in the trenches being directly involved in making it happen, with some successes and some failures, which will always be the case. What you need are the hows and the whys – what works and what doesn't. That's what you have here.

Is the journey difficult? More difficult than you can imagine.

Is there a simple formula? Only the ones provided by the business press, which simply don't work – for most people, most of the time.

In this book, we won't shrink from the difficulties of what's required, no matter how counter-intuitive they may seem to be, or how difficult to implement. You will meet up with the most tough-minded, realistic perspectives on leadership ever brought to life by those who had what it takes to reflect honestly on their successes and their failures. It is not the ideas that make it happen. It is the person who deploys them in her thinking and being, and thus in her doing.

You can't be who they were. But you can learn how to develop your own capacity for thinking, being, and doing when trying to forge *your* way.



Finally, is this a “how-to” book? Yes, in a way. But it is not a book about how others did it. It is a book about how it can be done ... by you.

Leadership is an art. It requires you to have a compelling cause. That’s your part of it. For real success, you need to be informed by someone who has been there, done that. That’s what I am providing here.

A guidebook for learning how to do it ... by doing it.

## Who Should Read This Book?

Anyone who is seriously interested in optimizing his or her leadership capabilities.

It is for practicing CEOs and high-level executives. It is for anyone who presides over any type of organization or institution – commercial, government, voluntary. It is for anyone who intends to be the “best” in his or her roles in life, from managers and coaches to athletes and musicians to lovers and parents. It is for anyone who intends to perform optimally in any role. While the specific circumstances may vary, the kind of thinking required to make it happen is universal.

It is for anyone who wants to improve his or her ability to lead – herself or others – in any enterprise or venture in life. It is about life. It is about achievement. It is about living with purpose, which is the only reliable source of quality of life and of rewarding engagement with life there is.

## One Caveat

You may be inclined initially to disagree with some of the perspectives offered in the pages that follow. That is understandable. Much of what undergirds leadership thinking is *counter-intuitive*. It simply runs contrary to much “common”



knowledge. If you want something other than conventional results, then you have to learn to think in certain unconventional ways.

You can't be successful in a leadership role if you think like everyone else does. You have to see the world as leaders see the world. If you take this book to heart, and if you practice, you can prepare yourself for a leadership role.



## How to Use This Book

A couple of suggestions about how you might maximize your take from what's available here:

The first is that you want to be able to dip into this guidebook at any place it may seem personally advantageous or necessary to do so. But to be able to determine this most effectively, I would suggest that you first carefully read *Openers* and *Part I: How To Think About What Needs Thinking About*. This will give you a perspective on the rest of the book and provide a basis for where you might dip into it for your personal advantage from there on.

The second is that you can use the *Annotated Chapter List* as your guide. There may be enough description there to take you where you need to go at any time, given your personal needs and interests.

Since this is a guidebook, you will want to have it around, easily accessible, to refer to certain key sections to help you think about and implement the ideas that most appeal to you in your situation. You won't always get what you need with one reading, particularly a once-over-lightly. What's here is here to be studied and internalized, not merely "read" – to make it bear fruit for you, in the form of your improved performance as a leader.

It's impossible to write a book that is personally for the one individual who is reading this now. In your use of this book, it is necessary for you to seek out and incorporate what you need.



It's here. You just have to find it and put it into practice. Your real learning lies not in what is here, but in how you apply what is here.

If your learning journey is not fun and exciting, it will not bear fruit.

Some chapters, and some parts of those chapters, will appeal to you more than others. That's as it should be. Let your appetite, your needs, and your present circumstances be your guide. Explore. Be pulled by your own needs.

However: It is very important that you invest in the early chapters (about how to think about what you need to think about). They inform everything else in this book. If you don't get the thinking part down, you may not gain the perspectives that will make all the rest of it work for you. It's not for the casual reader. It's for those who seriously want to equip themselves to fulfill a leadership role. It's a matter of gaining as much as you can of what you need – of all of this distilled experience and knowledge about how it's actually done – to prepare you for your own journey to real achievement.

Reading this book is not a measure of much. But using it to achieve great and worthy goals ... that will be the measure of what you did with what's here.

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## ANNOTATED CHAPTER LIST

<b>Openers: Some Preliminary Stretching Exercises</b>	<b>1</b>
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Offers an issue-by-issue overview of the unconventional paradigm one has to be familiar with in order to pursue extraordinary achievement – in any human endeavor, individual or collective. Sets forth how this book aims to lay out that paradigm and its implications, for any person who is serious about learning what has to be understood in order to achieve high performance.

<b>PART I: HOW TO THINK ABOUT WHAT NEEDS THINKING ABOUT</b>	<b>19</b>
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Takes the reader on an expedition that explores, in the most fundamental way, *how* to think about what needs thinking about. What is it the leader of any endeavor to excel needs to be able to think about, and how?

<b>Chapter 1: Gearing Up: Some Preliminaries That Need Your Attention</b>	<b>21</b>
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Offers a very comfortable introduction to some of the main terms and concepts that structure the mind-set required.

**Chapter 2: Getting Underway:****Think On These Things****33**

A series (10) of “think pieces” that make clear how differently from the mainstream one must be able to think in order to lead oneself, and/or others, in the pursuit of optimum performance. For example, “Conventional ways of thinking and doing invariably lead to conventional results.” If you seek unconventional results, and being “the best” at anything would certainly be an unconventional outcome, you have to learn how to think habitually in that paradigm.

**Chapter 3: The Leader’s Lexicon: I****59**

A *lexicon* is like an inventory of a person’s thinking tools – the concepts and “theories” with which he or she thinks. It is the “content” of a person’s mental repertoire. The purpose here is to draw out and examine in detail some key concepts that are fundamental to any successful leader’s ready, everyday lexicon. This will illuminate how leaders understand common terms in an uncommon way.

**Chapter 4: The Leader’s Lexicon: II****83**

Continues the inventory started in Chapter 3, starting with the consequences of how the leader (of self and/or others) thinks about people. Missing *this* one guarantees failure in any attempt to provide leadership. Others include “problems,” the inescapable issue of “ROA” (Return on Attention), and how people who have excelled have understood such matters as “time.”

**PART II: OBSTACLES AND BARRIERS****111**

Part II answers the questions: What makes it so hard? And, why do most people underestimate the difficulty of high performance? The perils are all there for the person who would



undertake leading a change in that direction, as Machiavelli warned back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And yet a few are successful in changing “the order of things.” How do they get past those obstacles and barriers?

## **Chapter 5: Dragons** **113**

From the earliest recorded history, adventurers and heroes have always encountered *dragons* on their quests. However, it was understood then (less well today) that those “dragons” were mainly internal. What people imagine is going to happen to them on the path to any goal or destiny bears more upon whether or not they set out, and how easily they are discouraged, than do any actual obstacles they might encounter. How do leaders deal with their dragons?

## **Chapter 6: The Way You Think About Things** **123**

Nothing is more important than the way a person conceives of him or herself relative to his or her goal or cause. That’s because this is what determines how that person will perceive their path given the obstacles encountered, and also determines how others will perceive that person. There are pratfalls in the way leaders think, such as the fact that much of what comes with being the *boss* is addictive. If those addictions cannot be overcome, the prognosis for success as a leader is very low. This is but one of several such obstacles dealt with in this chapter.

## **Chapter 7: The Drivers, Right Or Wrong** **135**

This chapter examines in detail what actually drives human behavior (not the conventional ideas about this subject). If you’re thinking about this rightly, you will be successful. If you’re stuck in the wrong ideas about them, you won’t. If you have misconceptions about the “drivers,” yours or others’, those misconceptions will function as a barrier to your becoming the person who leads the way to high performance.

**Chapter 8: Under-Empowerment** 147

People are under-empowered if they are not fully competent to do what they do, or want to do. People are *empowered* by their own competence at what they do. This is not something you can confer on yourself or on others. It has to be earned through effort, discipline, and diligence. This is one of the keys to achieving extraordinary performance. This chapter sets forth the obstacles that “under-empowerment” presents, and what has to be done about it.

**Chapter 9: Dumb Systems** 159

Another barrier to the pursuit of high performance or of excelling is that of trying to support the endeavor with systems that work against the cause they are supposed to be aiding. These are “dumb” systems. Success depends upon learning how to identify dumb systems and to replace them with smart systems. This chapter explains what systems are, and how to distinguish the “dumb” ones from the “smart” ones.

**Chapter 10: “Pop” Culture** 169

One of the most potent obstacles to great achievement is ~~the~~ *popular culture* – the “formulas” for living that people consume when they attend to popular music, popular television or radio, popular magazines and newspapers, and the popular folklore that emerges in all of the talk that gets generated by the universal consumption of this fare. This chapter focuses on the false ideas that people pick up there and bring to their lives or their workplace, and how those need to be displaced by unconventional ideas – the ones required for any elevated level of achievement and performance. Pop culture will take you in some direction other than the direction you need to be going to achieve extraordinary results.



## Chapter 11: Perversity

185

The world we live in is almost infinitely more *perverse* than people believe. It is a person's own perversity that keeps him or her from carrying out even the most mundane of their dreams or goals in life. Assuming one can overcome his own perversity, it is still the case that the world does not aid people in their endeavors, but usually throws more perversity in their way. For leaders, this is a paradox: they must overcome their own perversities in order to see clearly the perversities they will encounter daily in pursuit of their cause. And leaders have to have the "weapons" to slay or defend against those perverse dragons that will otherwise defeat them.

## PART III: HOW IT'S DONE

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So, we've come to what some readers would consider the good parts – the how-to-do-it parts. For some, what follows might be the main target. But this book does not pander to what readers think they want. You get plenty of that in the sop being spoon-fed to you in the hundreds of *how-to* and *recipe* books being hyped week after week. This book is intended to provide readers with what they *need*: as much real-world from-the-trenches reality about this whole process as they can stand. There is an even more compelling reason for why this part of it comes now. Most attempts fail. They fail in large part because those who tried to apply the recipes did not fully understand what was required on their part to make those ingredients (tools) work. The better you understand the tools and what can be done with them, the more effective you will be. Using a tool not fully understood, to accomplish something not fully understood, is the formula for failure. There's a good reason why first things are first in this book. Leaders steep themselves in what they need to know first. This makes them who they *are*. Then they act. Your performance will be no better than your preparation, which is why all of those preceding chapters came first.

**Chapter 12: What It Takes** **203**

This chapter is about what it takes to perform superbly: preparation, luck, being *had* by one's cause or mission (as contrasted to "having" one), inexhaustible enthusiasm for that cause and, for leaders of enterprises – surrounding oneself with the people who are going to make it happen by casting the right people in the right roles. Then, the four covenants between the leaders and those people who are going to make it happen. This requires engaging people *directly* and *necessarily* in what has to happen. Sounds easy? It's not. Most people give up and start looking for an easier way almost immediately. They remain on the lookout for "fairy dust" or some other panacea. There are none. What's required to make it happen is what has always been required, as this chapter makes clear.

**Chapter 13: More Of *What It Takes*** **215**

What else does it take? Dealt with in this chapter: a robust plan, telling the story of how we get from here to there compellingly, and the role each person plays in that story. Keeping up the impetus and sustaining the change. The *power* required to make it happen. Some right-headedness about communication and why communication can't do what you'd like it to do. And why leadership and communication are so intricately interrelated.

**PART IV: SOME TOOLS FOR  
MAKING IT HAPPEN** **229**

The preceding chapters described what it takes for the leader to *think about* how to put together the people, the organization, and the systems to make it happen. The next three chapters describe some of the manifest and tacit tools leaders use to align others with their mission. It is the competency of the user that makes



any great tool effective. These tools will not work for those who have not equipped themselves (along the lines of the preceding chapters) to be extremely competent in wielding the tools that will “make it happen.”

## **Chapter 14: The Basic Tools** **233**

The basic tools are those that contribute to making elevated performance *possible*, and those that contribute to making the required level of performance *necessary*. Making higher levels of performance possible requires (a) developing the competencies of people in their roles, (b) making the systems in which those people are embedded smart enough to both encourage and accommodate higher levels of performance, and (c) having a critical mass of leaders who exemplify the kind of culture that makes higher levels of performance simply the order of the day – day after day. The most basic tool is that of “Role Descriptions.” This chapter describes in detail how this extraordinary tool is conceived, and how to use it.

## **Chapter 15: More Tools** **251**

The next most basic tools for raising performance are “Performance Goals” and “Learning Plans.” Role Descriptions provide an idealized description of what a virtuoso in that role would accomplish over the long term. Performance Goals describe mutually-agreed-upon accomplishments, objectively measurable, on a time-line. These are integrated with the goals of the organization, top to bottom and side to side. Learning Plans address the competency shortfalls exhibited by any role-holder. Again – the measure of achievement is *demonstrated accomplishments*, on a time-line. Other tools dealt with in this chapter include measurement, how problems can be used for development of people and of systems, how organizations can be composed as a tool, and a thorough exploration of smart systems, which could be considered as “meta-tools.”

**Chapter 16: More - Power - Tools****267**

This chapter focuses on the best *power* tools the leader can ever have in his or her tool-box: communication (again), this time looking at the sheer capabilities the leader has for listening – and for being listened to. Then, how to design and implement communication *systems* that may facilitate productive communication, or might actually eliminate non-productive communication interactions – like “meetings.” If you want to get “lean,” more effective communication and communication systems offer the greatest cost-savings to be found. A key leadership competency is pure word-power, which is the ultimate source of leadership power. Little-used power tools like *ambiguity*, *seduction*, *unreasonableness*, and *luck* round out this chapter.

**PART V: CODES, VALUES,  
AND STRATAGEMS****287**

Codes of conduct, values and beliefs, and the core stratagems comprise the next three chapters.

**Chapter 17: Codes Of Conduct****289**

*A code of conduct* gets internalized by people in the process of acculturation. It is made up of the *rules* of comportment provided by the culture. A person may become a member of that culture if and when that person demonstrates that the “code” has been internalized. It functions tacitly, and makes up the operating rules for that person’s conscience. If the pursuit of great performance by an organization is to be successful, the code by which the critical mass of key people operate in that organization must be what’s needed to make that happen. This chapter explains why and how.

**Chapter 18: Values & Beliefs:****The Tacit Mediators****303**

People do not maneuver *by* their values and beliefs. They are the pawns *of* their values and beliefs. A person's values and beliefs, imported largely from the cultures and sub-cultures to which that person belongs, are the tacit mediators of the world the person "sees" and understands. All of a person's thinking, doing, and saying are mediated by those cultural values and beliefs. They determine not only a person's performance. They also determine over time that person's destiny. It is the collective and common values and beliefs of the people who comprise an organization that determine the organization's performance and *its* destiny. If you can't get them right and internalized, you can't arrive at your chosen destiny. This is where the transformation has to come from.

**Chapter 19: The Core Stratagems****315**

The *core stratagems*, which also operate implicitly – or tacitly – distill most of the key issues from throughout the book into a handful of very broad strategically-oriented concepts. Get these right and you get most of the rest of it right. They are not a summary of all the other ideas in the book. They are more like key foundation stones, which enhance the fit and function of all that precedes this chapter.

**Part VI: Envoi****331**

One meaning of envoi: A message to send you on your way. That's what this chapter is for.



**Chapter 20: A Short Course  
On Real Achievement** **333**

Not exactly a summary of all that has come before.  
More like a capstone. This is short. The more it reminds  
you of what was here to be learned, the more useful it will  
be to you.

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## Openers: Some Preliminary Stretching Exercises

Although it is also about *real achievement* in any form, this guidebook is mainly about making high-performance organizations, and the kind of leadership required to do so.

The kind of achievement we're talking about is a little bit like winning at Wimbledon or the Masters. If you haven't done so, it may be because you don't know how. If you do know how but haven't actually done it, it amounts to the same thing.

There's so much to think about, much to learn. A mental "stretching exercise" occurs when you encounter something you haven't encountered before. There's much in this guidebook that you haven't encountered before. The other kind of stretching exercise occurs when you have to accommodate a way of understanding something that runs contrary to the way you've always understood it.

You will find that much of this book is devoted to challenging you to understand something you already understand – but to do so in a different way. Most people avoid both kinds of stretching exercises as ingeniously as they can.

The sheer fact that you have come this far – the sheer fact that you are even skeptically open to being stretched into the mental shape you need to be in to accomplish what you want to accomplish – is evidence that you are an unusual person.

Most people take for granted they *could* do "it" (especially this "it") if they "wanted" to badly enough. They would be wrong.



Most people's minds are already made up about what can and can't be done. Their position is: "Don't confuse me with the facts." But it is precisely the *facts* that call for the rethinking that has to be done. Here's an example of a stretching exercise to get started on:

- People can't figure out what they need to know. People can figure out only what they are personally capable of figuring out. So they seek advice. And here a paradox rears its ugly face: *If you know the difference between good advice and bad advice, you don't need advice.*

In other words, the most useful advice is the kind that helps you to develop your capacity for distinguishing good advice from bad advice. Therefore a lot of the advice you are likely to be exposed to is *bad* advice because it doesn't raise your own abilities for discerning the good from the bad.

The more you think about this, the more effective your mental muscles will be. In what follows in this guidebook, you will encounter, page after page, the kinds of challenges to your thinking, based on the *facts*, to put you in the mental shape you need to be in to accomplish what you want to accomplish.

Just for fun, here is another stretching exercise that can produce great benefits to your thinking (what you believe), your being (who you are), and your doing

- *Conventional wisdoms always and inevitably produce conventional results. This means that if you perceive some problem or some opportunity in a conventional way (just because that's the way your mind works), you will come up with a conventional solution. But high performance, real achievement, is far from being the norm, far from being conventional. So the implication is that if you want to achieve extraordinary results, results that are not more or less average, you have to produce those results out of some fairly unconventional wisdoms. This guidebook is full of the kind of unconventional wisdom you need to achieve high performance. You have to stretch your mind to accommodate some of the counter-intuitive thinking that will challenge you in the pages ahead. You have*



to be open to the kind of stretching required to get into the mental shape necessary to make it happen. And to practice, practice, practice. The more different a different way of thinking seems to you, the more you have to consciously practice it.

## Some Immediate Challenges

Here are some immediate challenges. Exercising your thinking on these will help you to get in good mental shape, ready to take full advantage of all that follows in the rest of this guidebook.

- One is that *many try, few succeed*. How ought you to understand this? Why are there so few successes when there are so many who long for real achievement, at work or at home? You're going against the odds. Two-thirds to three-fourths of business organizations in the U.S. have tried some formula for becoming excellent. The "key," the blurbs blare, is TQM, or reengineering or "transcompetition" or "open book management," or simply "teaching the elephant to dance." There have been as many proprietary schemes for easy success sold as there have been people who thought they could make money off of them – off of you. But of all who have tried, in less than 10% of those attempts was there any noticeable improvement. In the case of "reengineering," there were many organizations that ended up worse off.

There is clearly a hunger for getting better, or of transforming into excellence. Those who buy the panaceas of the month gobble up a lot of empty calories.

There's no trick to beating the odds, here or at the game table. You just have to know what the odds are. And you need to be able to see through to the reason why they are what they are. You can change *your* odds by avoiding the reasons others have failed.

The main reason is probably this: those consumers of the panacea of the month are led to believe that the logic required to become high performance is the same logic that is required to become average or mediocre. It is not.



Another basic reason for these failures is that those who undertook some scheme for producing real achievement didn't understand that being great at something requires that you be *different*. Most of the people you know would like to be superior, but only if they can be like everybody else. In other words, trying to be different by being the same just doesn't work, no matter what the recipe says.

Another reason: Wimpy or inconsistent commitment. People get all fired up, and then lose their enthusiasm. Something to think about here: Enthusiasm without relentless commitment and devastating competence never produces much of anything worthwhile.

Still another reason: It's nice to think that if you really want to achieve high performance, to make an organization that is hands-down the best, you'll get a lot of support from other people and from the rest of the world. You would be wrong. You will encounter daunting obstacles and barriers at every step of the way. And you can't look to the world to make it easier for you just because you've undertaken to try. As Yoda says in *The Empire Strikes Back*,

*"There is no try. There is only do or do not."*

## Some Additional Stretching Exercises

Well, that's but one stretching exercise, and some examples for thinking how to go about it. Here are some additional stretching exercises. The better you can think through them and get yourself in the mental shape required, the better your odds.

- In spite of how seductive the "13 Secrets" or the "49 Steps" or the "8 Habits" may be, there are no easy answers. Any real achievement requires great effort, sacrifice, pain, and utter, utter determination. If you can't or won't pay the price, you will fail.
- The difficulty of making a high-performance organization, of fulfilling any great and worthy cause, has never been *over*-estimated. It is mediocrity that is easy, not excellence.



- The media will lead you into confusing what's merely in fashion with what actually works. There have never been any fashions in what it actually takes to excel.
- The *answer* to something is never the same thing as accomplishment. There are words, and there are real accomplishments. Dilettantes and pundits deal in words. Those who are actually doing it are too busy to talk about it.
- If you think you can buy a process or a technique that is going to do it for you, you would be as wrong as you can get. The best tool works only if wielded by the best wielder.
- The number of recipes increases as the overall competencies of cooks decrease. The less able people are to do something, the more the predators will feed them about how to do it.
- If you don't know what real achievement *is*, if you don't know what it looks like and what it feels like, and how radically different it is from luck, or talent, or magic, you are not ready to launch *any* effort.
- It doesn't really make any difference whether or not you can talk a good story. The only thing that makes a difference is what you accomplished with your understanding.
- What you think this book is about is not what you think it is about. It is about what it *is* about. To learn, sometimes you have to un-learn.
- There are many things we do in life that we can learn to do only by doing them. Walking would be an example. Making a high-performance organization, and developing the kind of leadership required to do so, would be another.
- The "how-to" industry (books, magazines, seminars, talk shows) are not there to solve your problems. They exist to solve *their* problems. Which includes taking your money



for ideas or theories that don't work because they need your money again next month.

- Real achievement is not an idea. It is an accomplishment. They are measured very differently.
- The more people there are who believe in the latest panacea, the less likely it is that you can make it work for you.
- In the past twenty years, there have been more than 10,000 books published on how to manage and how to lead. Why does the failure rate remain more or less constant?
- How is it possible that a recipe for how to be “the best” can be a best seller? Is it even possible that the question of how to be “the best” could have 10,000 answers?
- How is it possible that your organization could be unique if you think like everyone else does?

And so on. You get the point. But unless you think through and then think through these issues again and again, you won't have done the mental exercises that you need to do to get in the mental shape you need to be in to go on. *Have* you?

## Revisiting the Lobby

Entering this (or any) book is a little like entering a building. You arrive first in the lobby. There you have your first glimpse of what the building is like. And your question is always, How am I supposed to navigate this book (building)? What are my impressions thus far? How can I develop a mental model of this place so I can use it to my advantage? How do I assess what kind of advantage is here for me?

Fair enough. Let's leave the exercises for a bit and go back to the lobby. You'll encounter some of these mental exercises again later on.

This book is all about what you need to know – and do – in order to be successful at making a high-performance organization. Such real achievement is something most heads-of-organizations



who have tried have failed at. So what is it you need to know, standing right here in the lobby, that will tell you whether or not this is for you?

After four-plus decades of being intimately engaged in this effort, with scores of those who run our organizations of every size and type, here and abroad, I'm convinced (in spite of how more or less adequate many are) that most American organizations are plagued by many of the same problems. Some of those perennial problems are at least implied in the stretching exercises you have just considered. But to cut to the chase, there are at least three basic impediments. If you cannot honestly see yourself overcoming these, this book can't be of much help to you. Here they are:

1. People who sign up to make this happen fizzle or fail because they did not have or could not muster the level of commitment required. It turned out they didn't have the overriding passion for it, or the level of perseverance required.
2. Those who didn't make it either (a) didn't have what it takes to make it happen, or (b) didn't have what it takes to develop in themselves those extraordinary ways of thinking, being, and doing that are simply necessary.
3. They never had a deep appreciation of what was required to make it happen.

The first of these impediments is totally your problem. You can't get the gumption required from reading a book about it – not even this book. You can't get the needed passion, zeal, or stick-to-itiveness from reading a book – no, not even this book. You either have those or you have what it takes to perform them whether you actually have them or not. Real achievement cuts you no slack on these. If you don't have what it takes to see it through, then you may be better off not commencing the journey.

By this time, you've already figured out that the second of these impediments also belongs to you – with some collaboration here. If you don't right now have what it takes to develop those extraordinary ways of thinking, being, and doing, you've come



to the right place. With an experienced guide (distilled in this guidebook), you *can* develop in yourself what needs to be developed to make it happen.

The most valuable thing I can provide you with is how to really understand what is required to make it happen. That level of understanding is indispensable. If you don't really understand how to do something, it's unlikely you'll be able to do it. So if you do your part, you can depend upon this guidebook to help you with all the rest of it.

It *can* be done. Not by belief. Not by faith. Not by desire or ambition or effort alone. It requires understanding. Real understanding. And that requires a significant level of collaboration between you and me, represented here by the tough and challenging perspectives and facts presented in this guidebook. If you can do your part of it, then you're in the right place.

## Why Would An Otherwise Sane Person Take This Path In Life?

If you persist, you will find yourself wondering, when the going gets tough, Why am I doing this? It's the right question.

There are three basic reasons why a few people in history have committed themselves to real achievement:

**One** is fairly recent, but it's for money or notoriety. A large proportion of those who fail come from this category. That's because you can't buy anything that is really worthwhile. You can't "buy" real achievement. And fame is fickle. Those who head up businesses are often like shooting stars. The belief is that if you pay them enough money, they can make real achievement happen. But for the person on whom so much depends, if the primary focus is on money, then it won't be on achievement. The media, more full of myth than substance, identify their celebrities of the month. Then they move on. Sustained achievement isn't newsworthy.

**Two**, some people are just naturally perverse enough to pursue greatness for their own reasons. They are internally driven to



compete and to outperform their peers. These “Lone Ranger” types also disproportionately contribute to the ranks of the failures. That’s because they often can’t get along with other people – the very people they would need to make a high-performance organization, or to sustain it.

**Three**, there are those who see it as a *moral obligation* – if for any reason they end up in charge of an organization, to make of that organization all that could possibly be made of it. To make it great. These are the same people who deeply believe that they have a moral obligation to make of themselves all that could be made of that unique raw material they happen to have. It seems clear that most of the real successes come from this category. That may be in part as follows: Anyone who seems to be seriously engaged in the pursuit of outstanding performance these days (either individually or organizationally) is looked upon by other people as marginally insane. So you are always going to get the question, “Why in the world are you doing this?” Presumably it is unthinkable that a person would choose that difficult, less materially-rewarding path rather than the easy path of self-indulgence, greed, or of “balance.” To be able to answer, “Because I have to,” may limit the conversation so each can get back to the different paths they have chosen.

Other replies that reveal possible success:

- “Because, for me, it’s the only right thing to do.”
- “Because I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t strive mightily to be the best.”
- “Because there’s a high road and a low road, and I personally have to take the high road.”
- “Because I can’t take my toys with me but I can leave behind a legacy that will affect other people for years to come.”

These are some of the kinds of answers you might get from a person who is rightly cast and fully dedicated to his or her role in making it happen. For most other people, it is usually a matter of doing much the same thing, over and over again, while hoping



for a different outcome. You may recognize that as an old Chinese description of insanity. So there may be a real question about which one is insane – the person who does what is necessary in order to achieve what is possible; or the person who does the same thing over and over again, but merely “hopes” for a better result.

## The Immediate and Inevitable Challenge

If this is the path you choose – of doing whatever is necessary to achieve some great and worthy purpose – you will be quickly challenged by other people who might have to be involved. Those other people are going to ask you: “Why should **I** be doing this? Why should **I** buy in? What’s in it for **me**?”

If you don’t have a convincing answer, if they can’t read you as *being* the answer, your attempt to achieve a high-performance organization will essentially be dead in the water. You have to understand right from launch that a high-performance organization, while it can be measured in many other ways, is fundamentally an organization that is *good* for people. Most people work in organizations that are unhealthy, and for bosses who are not good for them. Most people go to work in the morning and come out at the end of the day no better off as human beings than they were at the beginning of the day. Many are worse. If the people who work at your place are not measurably better human beings at the end of the day, or when they get their 10-year pin, then you do not have a high-performance organization.

It is not just money, although they will have more of that. It is not just the fact that they will have far more control over the conditions of their lives at work, although they will have much more of that. It is something very counter-intuitive in the American culture. It is that the one condition that predicts to happiness and to relevance in life – to the very meaningfulness of life – is *competence*. The more competent people are in their roles in life, the more stimulated and satisfied they will be in their lives. And a high-performance organization is based in the competence of



the people in every role in the organization. To have a competent organization, you have to have competent people in every role.

Seeking happiness directly, as we all know now, is the surest possible way of not getting it. That's why the more you try to provide for people's happiness or satisfaction at work, the less likely it is to happen. It doesn't come from what people are given. It comes from how competent people are to live their lives at work (the bulk of the day). So what is needed for an organization to be extraordinarily competent at what it does is the competence of every person in that organization. Thus it is win-win.

Here are some stretches:

- Most people don't know what you have just read. It is part of the power of every compelling leader who has ever lived.
- The less competent people are at work, the more they lose interest in their work and in everything around them. No wonder the day seems so long to less-than-fully competent people!
- Competence is the only thing people have that is portable. They certainly cannot take their "politicking" gains with them to some other organization, which many failed CEOs have learned to their dismay.
- "Work" is not a way for a person to sell her time or soul for a paycheck. It is an integral part of one's life. The better a person is at it, the better a person's life will be for it.
- As someone's boss, if you are not good for yourself in this sense, you won't be good for other people – the kiss of death for any would-be leader. If you can't effectively and advantageously lead yourself, then there's little hope that you can lead others.

Will those people be clamoring for you to make it necessary for them to be more competent at what they do? Not bloody likely. They will resist you every step of the way. After all, you resisted *you* in much the same way. If you didn't win with you, you aren't going to be good for them.

The more broadly and deeply you can understand how to answer their questions and their objections, the more likely you are



to succeed in your venture. This guidebook can supply you with the way of thinking you will need to be able to do this. You just have to make it a part of who you *are*.

## “Wanting” Vs. Doing

In the top executive seminars I conduct around the world and where I sometimes talk about such things, I’m frequently asked, “How many top executives can actually do this, based on your experience?”

My answer? “All of them *could*. Are you asking how many will actually carry it off?”

“Yeah,” they say. “That. And, what’s the difference? What do you mean, all of them *could*?”

“By ‘all of them could,’ I’m acknowledging the fact that whether they can or not depends ultimately on whether they did or not. And we’ve all been surprised from time to time by our judgments of people and what they actually do. In all cases, it’s possible. It might take one person a few years and considerable effort. It might take someone else a lifetime and incredible effort. But perseverance counts for more than potential. So how many will actually produce great outcomes? Out of every ten or so who really, really *want* to be responsible for great achievements, maybe three or four will actually make some progress. But it’s likely that no more than one out of ten will see it through.”

“So it’s not potential? It’s not motivation?”

I have to answer as follows, “It’s not potential. More potential goes to waste than anything else. But, by itself, what we’re calling potential won’t do it.

“Motivation? I don’t even know what that means. It’s a weasel word. People use it to excuse themselves and put others’ achievements into the hands of psychological fate. It’s nonsense. A person either accomplished what she set out to accomplish or didn’t. Nothing is added by saying, ‘She was motivated to do so.’ The key point to focus on here (a stretching exercise for readers) is



that *wanting* to do something and *doing* it aren't even in the same universe. People who aren't going to do it will waste everyone's time by talking about how much they *want* to do it. They are delaying, in the hope that someone or something will do it for them. The person who is going to do it just does it. Nothing is added by saying, 'I want to do this or that.' It's more like a way of bonding with other people who would rather talk about what they *want* than to make the effort needed to bring it about."

There is nothing easy about being the best at something. And there is nothing easy about *learning* how to be the best at something. "Wanting" is the easy way out. "Doing" is what it's all about.

Then comes another often-asked question, "So how do you decide who you're going to work with? If you're picking one out of ten, how do you do that?"

"I don't always do a good job of picking the winner. By the time an executive has made it to the top, he or she is really good at deceiving other people. So I've been had – mainly by enthusiasm, as we all are. It is very intuitive, like Michael Jordan's decision to shoot this one or that one is ultimately intuitive. Based on experience. Asking a lot of questions. But it probably comes down to how much experience the candidate has had at strategizing and putting whatever effort is required into accomplishing the impossible. It may not seem so at the outset, but it won't be long before a task will appear that seems to be impossible. That's what will separate those who do from those who don't."

The key, certainly, is preparedness. If you read carefully and apply the distilled lessons available in this handbook, you can be optimally prepared. Beyond that, there are factors over which no one has any control.

## Competence And Control

People often talk about competence or "talent" as if it would permit you to control things over which you do not and cannot have control. Competence alone will not ensure your success.



Competence optimizes only your preparedness. The real world will go on functioning as it does, immune to your will. The real world is oblivious to your wants and needs, even to your competencies. Real achievement has to be pursued in that world, not the world of fairy-tale success stories. The real world favors those who are best prepared, because they are prepared for both good “luck” and bad “luck.”

It is frequently the case that people try to control what they cannot control. And fail to control what they can control. What they can control are their own capabilities and competencies. To be fully competent does not give you any more control over the uncontrollable than others. What it does provide is being prepared for whatever happens. And competent people have contingency plans.

There is no way of creating superhuman people or organizations that can bend the world to their will. Increasing one’s competence every day in every way is the only reliable means there is of coping effectively with a world that operates by its own logic – not yours.

You will never be omniscient or invulnerable. The best you can do is never ceasing to develop your competencies, and/or that of your organization. No book can provide you with immortality or certain success. But, if thoughtfully internalized and practiced, it can help you immensely to equip yourself to be prepared. If you bring unremitting passion to bear, the mental tools and provisions offered here will provide you with what you need to make the journey.

## Thinking Tools

*As you think, so will you **be**.  
And as you are, so will you **do**.*

I’ve met many top executives who simply did not have the mental horsepower to avoid getting into a problem in the first place.



Or the exceptional mental wherewithal to extract themselves from it once they had gotten themselves into it.

In that sense, most of the problems such leaders face are self-inflicted. If they had the thinking tools needed, they could have avoided, or at least anticipated, most of the problems that predict to their future. If they had the kinds of thinking tools they needed, they might have been able to avoid or to get around the problems they face, and move on.

This is a book of *thinking tools*. You need to think in a certain way to provide the kind of leadership required for the pursuit of real achievement. If you intend to be the primary cause of making a high-performance organization, you have to think in a high-performance way. The logic that enables the achievement of high-performance is not the logic that leads to being “good enough.”

Reading an advertisement about a new tool does not thereby equip you to use it effectively. You have to learn, thoroughly, what the tool does and how. And you have to learn what you and the tool can do collaboratively.

Many of the thinking tools you will encounter in this handbook may be expressed as axioms. Like the one above. The most generally-applicable axiom I know of, and the one which best explains what most needs explaining for leadership, is this:

*Most people prefer a problem they can't solve  
to a solution they don't like.*

To put this in the immediate context, what this means is that most people will go on being pretty much like they are. If their problem was how to create a great organization, or even a reliably effective one, they will be likely to have that same problem next week and even ten years from now. The reason: The effort required to eliminate that problem and to get involved in real achievement just looks like more effort than they feel like putting out. It just looks more difficult than they want to deal with. So they deal with



the problems of mediocrity – and all of the insoluble problems that go with the nurturing of, or tolerance for, mediocrity.

This is a difficult book because the process is a difficult one. You could buy a book that promises success in a couple of minutes or by simply owning the panacea.

Well, there are none that will work for you regardless of how you think and who you *are*. And I would be insulting your intelligence and further tarnishing your credulousness by making it look easy. It never was. It is not now. It never will be. Can you buy an answer that does not, ultimately, depend on *you*? You can, but it won't work.

## So Who Is This Book For?

Good question. It may be for you if you've got what it takes.

Or, if they've got what it takes, it may also be an invaluable handbook for anyone put in charge of any kind of human endeavor; for anyone who has to achieve something great through themselves or other people. Thus, by definition, it is for parents, for coaches, for military leaders, for private sector leaders, indeed for the would-be leaders of any human endeavor that has some great and worthy aim, or purpose, or mission. It is for teachers, for mentors, and for any kind of role model.

It is for anyone who has to carry out real achievement, whether by choice or by happenstance. There are, after all, no *leaders*, at least not until historians dub them thus. There is only "leadership." That's what's required when one can take on that role for purposes of changing history.

That could be you. That's because it could be any one of us. But only if we are competent and prepared to fill that role. You could be. You could make this a better world – for yourself, but as well as for all the rest of us.

*Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing* is your guidebook for how to do that. Bring your passion, your zeal, your determination. The pursuit of real achievement is the pursuit of real life.



So let's get on with what will work. If you can incorporate the thinking tools you need, then you will be the person you need to be. Only then can you do what needs doing.

***N.B.** You will meet up with some of those tools more than once in the pages that follow. This is not careless repetition. It just means that internalizing a tool and how to use it usually requires more than one encounter. But, then, most people prefer a problem they can't solve ...*



# PART I

## How To Think About What Needs Thinking About

This first part takes you on a trip. A mental expedition to explore, in the most fundamental way, how to think about what needs thinking about – and why. It will turn out to be indispensable.

You will like it if you have a keen interest in great performance. Or in leading your organization on the long and difficult journey to great achievement.

And then only if you have what it takes to undertake such a rigorous and challenging journey. Only if you have what it takes to learn what needs learning, and to persevere.

**Chapter 1** offers you some essential provocations to help you get into the needed frame of mind for what's to come.

**Chapter 2** provides a series of “think pieces” – brief engagements with what needs thinking about – and how.

**Chapters 3 and 4** put before you a few key terms and how you may have to understand them if you are to provide the leadership required. Real achievement requires understanding basic terms, but sometimes in an uncommon way. How you define things (your lexicon) will determine who you are, and how you do what you do.



## Gearing Up: Some Preliminaries That Deserve Your Attention

If you were to read every book ever written about real achievement, about organizational excellence, and about the leadership required even to undertake such audacious causes—even if you were to memorize them all – that still would not enable you to do what has to be done. You have to learn how *by doing it*. Even then, it would still depend upon who you *are*. And then, upon how doggedly determined you are to fulfill your mission in life. And even then, upon how well you can surround yourself with the people who are going to make it happen. And having a strategy for getting there. And, always, upon a certain amount of the right kind of “luck.”

No scheme for making you “successful” – even your own – comes with an iron-clad guarantee. The reason is simple. The only person who can make you successful in a venture such as becoming extraordinary is you. Your personal mental and emotional resources may be superior, or not. Your timing may be fortuitous, or not. Your people may be better equipped, or not. If your business or personal strategies are wrong – forget it. If you do not pursue your mission in life ruthlessly enough you will simply get whatever is dealt to you, good or bad. About “luck,” that’s easy. Good fortune favors the best prepared. That’s accomplishable for those who are incorrigibly determined – and willing to pay the price.



A large part of that price is how you think about the things that make a difference. That's what this book is for. To help you think about what needs thinking about.

This *book* will not transform you into a high-performance person or your organization into a high-performance organization. Nor will this *book* make you into the leader you would need to be. No book, no seminar, no “program” can do that.

But, if you internalize the way of thinking this book offers, and if you implement these ideas by putting them into daily practice until they are habits, then you will have the necessary wherewithal for undertaking the journey of becoming “the best” – a leader of a truly high-performance organization, or a world-class achiever.

Once again, this *book* won't do it. But if you take what is offered here to heart and mind, *you can* become the leader you need to be. These ideas are like the launching pad and the vehicle. *You* have to be the one to power the ideas. *You* have to make it happen. *You* have to be the engine. That “launching pad” cannot be made of words. It has to be dug down to bedrock – to belief, to habit, to a commitment from which you cannot escape or abandon, to a way of thinking and doing that comes from who you *are*.

It's not these words – these or any others. It's the passion and the competence behind the words. It's not the understanding – yours or anyone else's. It's the passion and the competence that focuses the understanding, like an overwhelmingly powerful magnet that is unfailingly energized by how you think about the things that makes a difference. It's about what you do with that thinking – how you put it into everyday practice.

If you're ready, willing, and able, let's collaborate in the building of this “launching pad.”

## 1. Create the habits that make the difference.

Behind, under, and before every perception, every feeling, every decision and every action, there are habits. Habits of mind, habits of perception, habits of feeling, habits of action and reaction.



“The world” about which we speak so loosely does not “inform” us. We are “in-formed” by our own thinking and feelings about what that world is like and what is going on in it.

In short, the first and last leadership lesson is this:

We are led by our *habits* – of feeling, of thinking,  
of perceiving, and of understanding.

Get those right, and everything beyond becomes possible.  
Get those wrong, and the outcomes will always be something you didn’t choose.

A leader’s perceptions, thinking, and feelings about the world inside or outside are informed by that leader’s cause in life. Most people believe that the world around them is a given, that when they look at it they are seeing what’s there. That what people say about it constitutes reality. The true leader knows that a perception or an interpretation of something is never more than just that. Reality is not obligated by what we say or fail to say about it.

The leader also knows that people do not choose their trajectories through life. How we live and maneuver through life is not something we can have simply by choosing it. It is our habits that drive the way we think, and feel, and have, and do, and see, and say. We cannot choose our ways of being and doing. But we *can* choose, within our capabilities for doing so, are the habits that inform our perceptions, our thinking, and our feelings. What makes the leader different is that he or she depends upon the habits *chosen* and developed to drive the direction and the outcomes of life. Not upon “hope.” Or “intention.” Or “desire.” We necessarily go in the direction our habits take us. You can’t get what you “want.” You can only get what your habits can deliver.

What characterizes the leader is his or her mental models, the heuristics used to assess the world and the strategies for undertaking his or her cause in that world. It is the unique, unconventional habits of thought, feeling, and action that underwrite the leader’s success in his or her endeavor.



- You do not acquire those habits of thinking merely by reading about them. Like all habits, they have to be developed.
- Nor do you acquire them by reading what celebrities tell us was *their* recipe for success.
- You get those by working backward from your cause and laboriously building into your thinking and feeling and doing those habits that are going to propel you in the direction of your cause. It is *your* cause that prescribes the habits you need.

Thinking. First things first. It is how you think that determines what you do. Habits of thinking produce habits of seeing and doing.

## 2. You have to be dissatisfied.

You have to be sufficiently dissatisfied with yourself and your performance in your roles in life to do something about it. We will talk more about “roles” later on.

To be satisfied with the habits that will determine your life is to endorse them and to acquiesce to wherever they take you. Most people seem to prefer whining about their lives, or their work, or their friends, or the world, than to doing something about the only thing ~~we~~ they have the prerogative to do something about – themselves. Leaders understand that they cannot get to a place they have chosen to get to by being victimized ... by *themselves*, which opens the door to being victimized by all the rest of the world.

- The leader changes the world by who he or she *is*. That *might* occur as the result of some one-in-a-billion genetic or historical accident.
- The only leadership worth pursuing is not achieved by accident. It’s achieved by the habits of thought, feeling, and by the action required by the circumstances.



### 3. Understand your interdependencies.

The leader understands that pursuing any significant cause in the “real” world requires doing so in a complex web of interdependencies. The stand-alone hero who single-handedly achieves what appears to be impossible goals exists only in myth, in the movies, in the imaginations of lazy journalists, or in our dreams.

We all need someone who will make us do what we ought to do. If you have a powerful conscience, that will function as the “other.” Or, if you have the kinds of habits that make it necessary for you to do what you *ought* to do (your “duty”), those will also function to make it necessary. For the rest of us, what’s required is surrounding ourselves with the kind of people who will not let us default ourselves, who will make it necessary for us to do what we have to do in order to pursue our cause in life. Without an inner or outer context that absolutely makes it necessary, we will, more likely than not, fail by defaulting.

The leader is **first** of all interdependent with the historical moment. If the timing is right, he or she may become “the leader.” If the timing is not right, if there is not a compelling need sensed by potential constituents for that person’s leadership, that person will be unknown to history.

**Second**, “the leader” (of course we’re talking about the would-be leader) is totally interdependent with those people on whom the success or failure of his or her cause depends. You’ve all heard the sing-song-y thing about “For want of a nail, the shoe was lost/For want of a shoe the horse was lost . . .” and so on, until it is revealed that the battle was lost. That’s the kind of interdependence we’re talking about here. Patton understood that his success as a field general depended upon the competencies of the lowliest recruits. That’s why he paid so much diligent attention to the development of the competencies they would need under adversity.

**Third**, “the leader” and the success of his or her cause will always be interdependent – inseparable – from the strategies and tactics put in play to make it happen. If they’re “right” for the historical moment, there will be success. But it will never be



known whether or not those strategies were the “right” ones until the results are in. No guarantees. Just intricate and inescapable interdependences.

**Fourth**, any leader will remain over the course of the endeavor interdependent with whatever happens along the way. These may be happenstances. These may be a competitor’s counter-moves or strategies. These may result from the fact an alarm clock didn’t go off. Stuff happens. And the test of the leader is how nimble he or she is with respect to improvising and moving on, whether it is only oneself involved, or thousands of other people.

The fancy term for all this is *systems*.

- What this concept enables us to understand is that everything that happens – certainly everything that happens in the human world – has to happen in the context of other things that are constantly happening.
- Linear thinking won’t work for leadership. What’s required is thinking “systemically” – that is, understanding that everything is related to everything else. In *some* way.
- The leader understands that everything is what it is because everything else in the system is what *it* is.
- That may sound like gobbledygook to you. If you can’t make it fundamental to your way of thinking, you’ll never have the leader’s edge.
- Not cause-and-effect. But interdependence, interrelatedness. You will never be more than those on whom you depend will enable you to be. And you will never accomplish more than the circumstances with which you are interdependent make possible.

You can’t change that. But you can equip yourself to pursue your cause in *that* world – for the leader, the “real” world.



## 4. Figure out how to have more LIFE.

Leaders seem to have more LIFE brimming behind their eyes and ears, within them and around them, in the evidences of their “spirit,” than the rest of us have.

That’s a major part of what makes successful leaders so seductive.

They have so much LIFE in them that they can give it away. They seem to infuse those around them with more of this ... LIFE. What is it? Exuberance? Zeal? Passion? Clarity of purpose? Single-mindedness? Openness? Whatever it is, it seems to be infectious. We see it in their eyes. In their movements. In the way they listen and ask questions. In the way they speak and engage others. In the way *they* grab hold of LIFE and won’t let it go.

- Does LIFE grab them more? Or do they grab more LIFE?
- Or, given that they are a part of a system that has everything in it that is there for the rest of us, maybe it has something to do with how they *think about things*, or with their habits.
- They inhabit the same *world* we do. So it must have something to do with *them*.
- Maybe the difference is that they had no interest in the difference.
- Maybe the difference emerged from their total immersion in the pursuit of their cause?

## 5. Interact with change.

There is the perennial issue of *change*. It has become so popular it functions like a “mantra” – people frequently mouth or pen the term but it has ceased to mean much more than suggesting that the speaker or writer is “with it.”

Leaders know:

- Things are changing all the time.



- Most of the changes that swirl around us are not within our control.
- Who people *are* – because that is a function of a whole bundle of habits exercised every moment of every day – is a primary source of resistance to change. We will most likely be tomorrow what we were today. For that to happen, the world tomorrow has to be reasonably like it was today.
- That to attempt to change the world, which would require people to change, is (as Machiavelli wrote) the most dangerous and uncertain undertaking there is.
- That it is the appeal of the alternative leaders describe that makes any significant change *possible*.
- But that it won't occur unless it is *necessary*.
- That change cannot be generated or sustained by rational means.
- That systems in which people are embedded are fiercely resistant to change because they are tacit, accessible only by habits of belief.

Leaders understand that they are wholly interdependent with the forces that resist change, **and** with the forces that enable change.

All this because leaders don't *make* change. They midwife it.

## 6. Measure what counts.

Leaders don't just measure. They measure what counts.

## 7. Ask what needs knowing.

About *anything* they imagine might bear upon the journey undertaken to fulfill their mission or cause in life, leaders have a minimal threshold. Being intensely curious about anything that might bear, one way or another, on the path they are on, leaders are in the business of asking questions. Asking questions of themselves,



of others, of all of the world's wisdoms and its histories and current complexities. Leaders aim not to "know" everything, but only to gather the intelligence they need, from any source that bears upon their cause – beginning with themselves, that can be used to accomplish what needs to be accomplished.

- There is no leadership "trivia."
- Leaders either know what they need to know in order to carry out their mission, or they fail.
- Their communication is that critical.

## 8. Hold people accountable for ...

What matters? Holding people accountable for the results? Or holding people accountable for how well prepared they are, at all times, for pursuing those results?

Managers seem to prefer the former, leaders the latter.



Something to think about.

## 9. Become ruthless about ...

Leaders often seem to be ruthless. On themselves? About what? Was there ever a leader who wasn't ruthless – about what might contribute significantly to the success or the failure of their endeavor?

How often have leaders failed by being reasonable? How often have they succeeded by being unreasonable (again, about what really matters)?

Given that most people have no particular aims in life, beyond having a comfortable "job," a comfortable spouse/lover/family, a comfortable house in a comfortable neighborhood with comfortable friends, a surfeit of comfortable leisure, and a comfortable retirement, can you achieve your aims in life by soliciting and indulging those people? Especially if one of them is *you*?



## 10. Think about your *role* as a leader.

It does hinge profoundly on how the would-be leader *thinks about things*, doesn't it? The leader understands this: *As we think, so we will be*.

The leader knows that leadership is not a characteristic of a person. It is a *role* that needs playing in a *story* that needs writing. If it isn't the *leader's* story that gets written, the leader knows that it will be someone else's story, and that he or she will be no more than a bit player in those other stories.

It is only when this kind of outcome is intolerable that the irresistible desire to lead gets born. The leader knows that leadership, being a role that needs to be played, is, metaphorically, a performing art. How the would-be leader plays that role will determine whether or not there are followers, and thus whether that leader's aims make a difference ... or not.

It may be that "All the world's a stage," but the only one that matters is the one on which you appear. And upon how well prepared you are for that role.

- Prepared with a way of thinking that makes a difference in *your* performance.
- Unconventional.
- A way of thinking that powers your performance.

The leader understands people better than most. The leader understands, for example, that if you want to know how a person *really* wants to live, you look at the way that person lives. If you want to know what people mean by what they say, observe what they *do*.

Much more ahead on this.

## 11. Understand mediocrity.

How to have a *mediocre* organization (for some variations on this, see my book, *How Executives Fail: 25 Surefire Recipes for Sabotaging Your Career*):



- Be a conventionally-minded manager or executive. Think like your peers do. Put your own immediate interests and feelings first.
- Make sure you have a conventionally-designed organization, with conventional systems, processes, and procedures that take precedence over performance.
- Hire only mediocre people, especially those who put their own immediate concerns and interests first. They will be more comfortable to have around if they have no particular aims in life.
- Navigate solely by the “bottom line.” The shorter the time frame, the better.
- Don’t expose yourself to excellence, except to critique it.
- Do what you can to force your customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders to “understand” *you*.
- Make sure all of the people and other sources whose opinion you value are no better than you are.
- Get excited only about what has *happened* to you in the past.
- Defer learning to your leisure time.
- Appear always to know everything.
- Use your thought-ways until they become comfortable “ruts.”
- Depend on habits that you didn’t choose.

That’s all worth thinking about. How? Shall we move on?

## POINTS TO PONDER

- + Habits take you where they are headed, not where you “want to” go.
- + Habits of thinking determine habits of seeing and doing. And of feeling.
- + If you can’t tell your story compellingly, you don’t have one.
- + Knowing-about is not the same as knowing-how.
- + Leaders don’t depend on what is known. They depend on what can be done with what is known.
- + Reading success stories won’t make you successful.
- + It is solely your cause that determines the habits you need.
- + Outcomes are never linear.
- + Be the source of change, or the victim of it.
- + Change has to be made possible, and then necessary.
- + Where their cause is at stake, leaders have to be capable of being ruthless.
- + We all need someone to make us do what we ought to do. Who?