Learning to Lead: The Journey to Leading Yourself, Leading Others, and Leading an Organization

by Ron Williams

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Dave's Reading Highlights

As for me, I was a black man from a family in which no one had ever attended college. My dad was a parking lot manager who later became a bus driver; my mom was a manicurist in a neighborhood beauty parlor. I grew up on the South Side of Chicago and attended the kind of public school where almost every high school graduate immediately went to work or joined the military. I knew almost no one with a white-collar job or who had attended college; I couldn't imagine what a business career would be like, and to top it off, I stuttered, which made me hesitant to speak in public.

Jack Rowe laughed when I told him the story. "Did you ever imagine that one day you'd be flying in a corporate plane on your way to meet with America's top CEOs?" he asked. "Never in a million years," I told him. "Neither did I," Jack confessed. And we agreed that ours was an amazing American story—the kind of tale of overcoming obstacles and conquering barriers that more people, especially young people, needed to hear about. Then and there, I resolved to one day share my story with the world, along with the lessons I'd taken from it. The book you're reading is the result.

At one of my early jobs, I was tested for various traits and discovered that, according to science, I am a strong introvert. At first, I assumed that my introverted personality, combined with the difficulty of crashing through the glass ceiling that keeps many black Americans (and others) from positions of leadership and authority, might rule out business as a viable career for me. But then I found myself fascinated by organizations—what makes them work, how people relate to one another, why some succeed and some fail—and I realized that my different upbringing and background presented an opportunity. The world and its people were a puzzle for me to solve. Despite the fact that I hadn't grown up in the privileged environment of many future CEOs, my inquisitive mind and the search for understanding that it engendered gave me a chance to succeed once I had an opportunity to lead.

I've also learned that having an overwhelming personal passion that guides and shapes your life isn't essential to business success. Some accomplished people know from childhood the kind of work they want to pursue—as physicians, attorneys, high-tech entrepreneurs, movie directors, bankers, or what have you. But many more are like me: interested in a wide array of topics, willing to learn a variety of skills, and ready to try their hands at a number of job assignments. My experience suggests that being flexible can lead to a career that is just as successful, rewarding, and enjoyable as climbing to the pinnacle of a selected field based on a single-minded passion and dedication. Two things are essential: a deep personal commitment to excellence in everything you do and a commitment to continual improvement.

Early in life, I learned one of the basic lessons of life in a danger zone: The best way to stay alive is to try to remain on everybody's good side and pray you never get caught in the crossfire.

Feel free to disregard the familiar assumptions that define the characteristics of a business leader. For example, many people would probably assume being an introvert would be a handicap for a leadership role. But over my years in business, I've found that being introverted has helped me to develop a leadership style that is

consistent, stable, and predictable—qualities I've used to help fuel my effectiveness.

Suddenly, I found I could see the traits that had shaped my self-definition as an introvert through fresh eyes. They didn't have to be weaknesses that relegated me to the role of a spectator in the arena of life. Instead, they could be strengths that I could parlay into a career as an active participant, and maybe even a leader, in that arena. Without realizing it, I had reframed myself—and, as a result, doors I had assumed were locked began swinging open.

But Haas had never officially accepted my resignation from Control Data. And less than two weeks later, he called me up. "We'd like you to take over our whole marketing operation, Ron," he said. "We'll move you to Minneapolis and let you run the business the way you see fit." Well, this was an offer I had to take seriouslymy first opportunity to manage an entire division within a big, successful corporation. But I hesitated. I'd never lived anywhere but Chicago, except for a single six-month stint in Boston on a consulting assignment. Minneapolis felt remote to me, like the end of the earth—or like North Dakota, which to a big-city boy like me had not exactly seemed the most scintillating place to live. Complicating matters further was the fact that I'd met a special young woman in Chicago named Cynthia whom I'd fallen in love with and who had a job of her own. I didn't want to disrupt our relationship for a job I wasn't sure I wanted. But I recognized the potential in Haas's offer. And the more I pondered it, the more I realized that the downside was minimal. "What's the worst thing that can happen?" I reasoned. "If I don't like the job, or Minneapolis, I can move back to Chicago and be exactly where I started—except that I will have under my belt a year or two of experience running a division of Control Data. I won't be worse off than I am now . . . in fact, I'll be better off. So why not take a chance?" I later learned to think of this type of choice as a reversible decision—one I could undo if it didn't work out. By contrast, an irreversible decision is one you have no choice but to live with, as when the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés scuttled his ships—and so irrevocably committed himself and his men to conquering Mexico. A

reversible decision is much less risky, which means you can make it with little fear.

In 1980, the world of electronic learning was in its infancy. Control Data was light-years ahead of everyone. It had commercialized an educational software product called Plato Systems, originally developed in the 1960s at the University of Illinois.

Some young people wonder whether having a mentor is key to career success. A mentor can be helpful, but I'd advise you not to spend time searching for one. Mentors come along without planning. Mentorship must arise naturally out of the situation rather than being forced. And above all, don't think of mentorship as something that someone owes you. You earn mentorship by demonstrating your value and your promise to someone in a position of leadership or authority. They may then choose to mentor you because of what they hope you can bring to the organization. The value and benefits must flow two ways, not one.

Once you've established a personal connection with someone you admire and would like to learn from, keep up the relationship and develop it. Look for ways to make yourself useful and interesting. For example, if you run across an article that's likely to be of interest to your new connection, send it along. If you have occasion to meet another person who might be useful to them, offer to provide an introduction. If you learn of a business opportunity they might find intriguing, pass it on. When you provide anything of value, you're nurturing a two-way relationship rather than simply seeking favors.

THE BENEFITS OF TAKING ON THE IMPOSSIBLE CHALLENGE Most businesspeople don't want to go anywhere near a company or a division that's in trouble. They fear being overwhelmed by the challenges and perhaps being tainted with the label of "loser." Yet troubled businesses offer great opportunities for learning and growth, particularly to aspiring leaders who may not otherwise have a ticket to the fast track.

Suffering isn't worthwhile in itself. Not every tough job is guaranteed to be a great learning opportunity. But many are. If the first few days or months of an assignment feel exhausting, overwhelming, or even painful, don't jump ship. Hang in there. There's a good chance that one day you'll look back on that job as the most difficult yet worthwhile growth experience you ever had. Highlight (Yellow) | Location 940

People can live happy, rewarding careers either as SEALs or as sailors. The most important thing is to avoid a serious mismatch. A person who is at heart a SEAL may never be content living the life of a sailor, while a natural-born sailor is likely to be ineffective and unhappy trying to fill the boots of a SEAL.

In the 1970s, I was a young management consultant pursuing business in the hinterlands of North Dakota. One October, a couple of potential clients took me to dinner at a country club on the evening of the club's annual Halloween party. Many people around the dining room were dressed in costumes—gladiator, princess, sorcerer, pirate. It was amusing to glance around at the fanciful outfits . . . until I saw that one of the revelers at a nearby table was costumed as a stereotypical ghetto hipster, complete with blackface, a giant Afro, and garish bellbottoms. As the only non-white guest at the club, I was intensely embarrassed. I felt as if every eye in the room was on me. How should I react? Was this a deliberate insult directed at me? Had my hosts knowingly brought me here to see how I would respond? If I said and did nothing, would they conclude that I was a "wimp"? Or that I found the racial mockery acceptable, maybe even funny? Part of me wanted to blow a gasket at the affront —or at least to walk out of the dinner party. I would have derived a measure of satisfaction from sending a message of outrage to my hosts and to the other white people at the country club. After all, the civil rights movement wasn't only about voting rights or school desegregation. It was also about treating everyone, including black Americans, with a modicum of decency and respect. Apparently that was a lesson some white people still hadn't learned. But rather than exploding, I took a deep breath. A glance at the face of my dinner partners quickly told me they hadn't anticipated, much less planned, this humiliating

encounter. They were red-faced and tongue-tied, unable even to figure out how to apologize to me. And they were watching me closely, praying I wouldn't worsen their embarrassment by berating them or making a scene, even though I would have been totally justified in doing so. I couldn't let the embarrassment pass without comment. "Some people have a peculiar sense of humor," I remarked. "The way they act belongs in the 1860s, not the 1970s." Then I went back to eating my dinner. Utterly relieved, my potential clients laughed shamefacedly and told me how embarrassed and upset they were by the idiotic behavior of their fellow guest. We all agreed to ignore the imbecile and get back to talking about business. I ended up winning the contract.

One piece of advice I often give to aspiring leaders: "If there's something that will make you feel really good to say—something you are itching to say—don't say it." Blowing up in the face of provocation is a way of losing power, not of claiming it. It shows that you are not in control of your feelings, and it reinforces many of the negative stereotypes ("hot-headed," "emotional," "angry," "radical") that are used to help keep outsiders down. Instead, assume that the people who are behaving in exclusionary ways are simply uninformed, insensitive, and unaware—which is likely true—and look for opportunities to quietly and assertively educate and enlighten them. For example, you might ask a question like, "How do you suppose you'd feel if everyone around you was talking about places and experiences you hadn't shared—and they knew full well that was the case?" Starting a constructive dialogue can turn an unpleasant encounter into an opportunity to demonstrate what being inclusive is all about. Don't misunderstand me—there are times when someone's behavior deserves and even demands a forceful negative response. If you hear a person in the workplace using racial slurs or witness an act of obvious sexual harassment on the job, you need to take advantage of the systems most companies have in place for lodging a formal complaint so that the misconduct can be addressed appropriately. I'm suggesting a way of defusing unpleasant incidents that don't cross that threshold—which covers most of the everyday conflicts we experience. Assuming positive intent can be an empowering strategy that disarms defensiveness and turns potential

enemies into allies. I've found it to be one of my most effective secret weapons.

A FRIEND OF MINE whom I greatly admire as a leader is Ken Chenault, who retired in 2018 as the long-term chairman and CEO of American Express. Chenault is often asked by interviewers to share his personal concept of leadership. He usually replies by quoting a definition of leadership once offered by the legendary French general and emperor Napoleon. The job of the leader, Napoleon said, is "to define reality and to give hope."

One thing I've learned over the years is that most people in business are interested in meeting expectations—but they're not interested in meeting demands. What's more, screaming at folks when they deliver bad news usually guarantees two things. First, they will tune you out —and while they may agree with everything you say simply to get you to stop screaming, they'll find plenty of ways to sabotage your efforts in the weeks and months to come. And second, no one will ever deliver bad news to you again.

During those first few meetings, as the plan was being created, one of my main jobs was to ask a lot of pointed questions. There's an art to asking such questions. When people protested that a particular deadline I suggested was "impossible," I would ask, "Can you help me understand how you determined that?" or "What are the factors that led you to conclude it's impossible?" I avoided starting my questions with the word why, having long ago discovered that "why" questions tend to make people feel defensive—and respond accordingly. By contrast, the more oblique wordings I used directed attention away from the blame game and exactly where I wanted it— toward uncovering the root causes behind their objections. That enabled us to jointly determine whether those objections were sound and, if so, what to do about them.

Similarly, when I had an idea for a creative approach that might overcome a supposedly insurmountable difficulty, I refrained from simply suggesting it. Instead, I might ask, "Have you considered X? How would it work out if we gave that method a try?" My goal wasn't

simply to give people the answer to an immediate dilemma but rather to educate them in a new way of thinking about problems, knowing that if they mastered this technique, it would help them generate their own solutions for years to come.

You need a business culture that encourages your team members to deliver bad news openly and early. You also need to voice that expectation clearly, calmly, and—at least in the beginning—often. Building a culture of transparency is difficult—a five-year process, according to most expert estimates. It requires the will to do it and the self-discipline to deal with people consistently. When a problem arises, resist the temptation to get flustered, lose your temper, or point the finger of blame. Instead, focus on analyzing what has happened and finding a solution. If you behave this way every time bad news arrives, people will eventually realize that you're sincere about valuing honesty and openness.

Over the years, I've found that most organizations have their fair share of smart, hardworking, and caring people. This goes back to my leadership mantra about assuming positive intent. Practically all people want to do the right thing. If they can't or don't, it's either because they don't know how or because they haven't been given the appropriate tools. It's the leader's job to remedy those shortfalls—not to berate employees for skills or resources they may lack.

One of the most useful decision-making techniques that I learned came from my executive partner at Aetna, the physician Jack Rowe who served as CEO during my first years there. Drawing on his clinical background, Rowe pointed out to me that the human body can yield hundreds of metrics, but in most circumstances, a physician needs to consider only twelve or fifteen—and in an emergency, only three or four are usually essential. In a similar way, the business decision maker should constantly strive to identify the few key data points in any situation rather than being overwhelmed and confused by a vast array of secondary information.

When I joined Aetna, the company was embroiled in litigation that had been brought against us by no fewer than twenty-six medical

associations across the country. We weren't the only insurance company in that situation. With the health-care system in our country in disarray, and with patients and providers alike struggling to deal with changes they found confusing and sometimes troubling, many competing insurers were also being sued. Unhappy with the way health-care coverage was evolving, physicians and hospitals were demanding changes to health insurers' business practices, including notifying providers prior to any change in coverage. The instinctive reaction from Aetna's previous leadership team had been to simply resist and ignore key stakeholders. Hence the lawsuits we now faced. Our lawyers walked us through the details of the litigation and spelled out various scenarios with differing odds of victory, and the whole executive team debated the potential financial impact of our alternative strategies. Jack Rowe cut through the complexities of the debate by focusing on the single most important issue. "This is all about Aetna's reputation," he insisted. "We can't do anything without the support and confidence of physicians. Yes, we could prolong this legal battle against them. Maybe we could even win. But in the process, we'd do more damage to the relationship between us. We'd end up losing much more than we'd gain." Rowe was right. Aetna became the first major insurance company to move quickly to negotiate a reasonable settlement with the health-care providers. This was a huge step in the process of repairing our damaged reputation and a milestone on the road that ultimately led to Aetna becoming the most respected company in the industry. It came about because Rowe helped us sort out what was insignificant from what was material—a crucial skill for every decision maker to master.

Avoid recency bias. This is the human tendency to be overly swayed by the most recent piece of data you've received or by the last argument that has been presented to you. After weighing all the information, allow a little time to elapse before you make a final decision, so all the data and arguments can settle into their proper perspective.

This cacophony of responses was a testament to the complexity of the health insurance industry. It is indeed a complicated business with many varied stakeholders whose mutual relationships are tangled

and sometimes conflicting. But the diversity of answers to our seemingly simple question also helped to explain the business troubles Aetna was experiencing. Given the fact that there was no single clear answer to the question "Who is our customer?" it's not surprising that different people and groups within Aetna were operating at crosspurposes, pursuing goals and serving agendas that produced a confused mishmash of results. As the conversation continued, the members of Donaldson and Rowe's leadership team gradually realized the nature of the dilemma they faced. Without intending to, they'd allowed Aetna to drift into a situation in which the company lacked a clear, overarching strategy that united all its varied activities behind a single fundamental purpose.

Suddenly the babel of competing interests could be reduced to relative simplicity, creating the possibility of developing a coherent strategy for the entire organization. It was one of several important first steps in launching the Aetna turnaround—made possible by asking a fundamental question that helped us get back to basics. Over time, we evolved a more sophisticated view based on the concept that the customer was the center of everything we did. The customer, we decided, could be anyone we served: a patient, a plan sponsor, a benefit broker, a consultant, another Aetna employee. By considering each link in the chain a customer, we were positioned to give everyone in the organization a line of sight to the ultimate customer—the patient. As I'll explain in a later chapter, this became a core element of the company's value statement, the Aetna Way. By the way, if the major investor who bailed out of Aetna during our darkest days had maintained his holdings, he would have made a billion dollars over the next few years.

Questions that highlight key problems. You may want to use questions that focus the conversation on the existing roadblocks to achievement—for example: •What are the barriers that are stopping us from achieving our goals? •Can you help me understand the difficulties that are in our way? •What methods have we already tried to alleviate the problem, and what specifically happened that caused those efforts to fail?

Questions that clarify the facts. When there is significant uncertainty over the nature of the problems you face, confusion over the facts, or disagreement as to the cause-and-effect processes that are creating your current difficulties, questions that probe the reliability of information can be important—for example: •This report describes our company's competitive situation—can you explain how it was developed? •You've indicated that X is the biggest challenge we currently face—can you describe how you reached that conclusion? •We've been discussing the main kinds of customer complaints we are dealing with—what is the source of the data on which that list of complaints was based?

Questions that probe an underlying story. Asking questions designed to elicit explanatory narratives can illuminate how the current problems of your organization came to be, which can be crucial to understanding their cultural, social, organizational, and psychological roots—for example: •How was the current system designed? •What's the story behind this issue? •Tell me about the decision-making process that was followed when our current strategic plan was developed.

Questions that suggest alternatives. When your team members' thinking seems to have gotten stuck in a rut, questions that raise alternative possibilities can be quite powerful—for example: •What might be another way of achieving the same goals? •Can you think of other organizations that have faced similar issues and used different approaches to address them? •What do you think might happen if we tried X as a first step toward tackling our current problem?

Questions that drill down to basics. When your organization is grappling with problems that go to the heart of its purpose—that is, when you suspect the organization may have fundamentally lost its way—then questions designed to raise basic, existential issues may be in order—for example: •What is the central goal of our organization? •What business are we in? •What is the single most important purpose that we exist to serve?

Avoid starting questions with the word "why." It's often important to get at the underlying reasons for people's behavior. Yet somehow that innocent word why has a way of sounding like an accusation. The question "Why did you do X?" seems to inevitably convey the implication that X was a stupid thing to do. I've found that I can elicit a less defensive, more forthcoming response to the same fundamental question by using a phrase like "what is the reason"—for example, "What is the reason you tackled the problem that way?" This wording assumes that there was a reason for the person's behavior and encourages them to share freely . . . and that's far more likely to enable you both to get to the heart of the problem more quickly.

One of the things I did during my early months at Aetna was to deliberately challenge the culture of Aetna nice. During meetings, I had my antenna up for symptoms of Aetna nice. These included behaviors like quietly ignoring factual errors or omissions in reports; changing the subject when conflicts arose that didn't lead to quick, painless resolutions; refusing to probe the reasons behind internal failures such as missed deadlines or flawed procedures; and being unwilling to address or even acknowledge conflicts between groups or departments, even when these conflicts led to systemic breakdowns. When one of these symptoms appeared, I didn't raise my voice, bang on the table, or level any accusations. But I did make a point of intervening in the conversation and forcing the crucial, hidden issue into the light of day. I might say something like, "I think we're ignoring an important problem here," or "It looks as though we have a discrepancy here that we'd better tackle rather than leaving it for another day." If I received pushback—and in the early days, it happened more than once—I might have to get a little more forceful: "You know, we're facing a financial crisis here. We don't have a lot of time to skirt or ignore important issues. We need to fix this company, and we need to fix it now. So let's get started. Okay?" I didn't have to make statements like that very often before the word got around: The days of Aetna nice are over. It's time to get down to business. And soon, everybody did. Over time, I developed other ways of using language to challenge the culture of nice and send signals that we had a serious need to up our level of performance. For example, in a meeting, after hearing a manager's report that fell short of what we

needed—it was vague and incomplete, and failed to address a key problem—I broke the company habit of offering an empty compliment or a meaningless line like "thanks for the effort." Instead, I came up with a shorthand phrase that conveyed the right message very clearly: "That report is a very good down payment, John." Translation: "You've given us half of what we need. Now go back to your desk and get us the other half —because we can't move forward until the whole payment is provided." And I would generally include the question, "What help do you need from others to deliver the balance of your commitment?" Don't get me wrong, I don't have anything against people being nice, but companies don't run on nice. I'm proud of the fact that many of the folks I worked with at Aetna came to me after a few months or years and said, "You know, Ron, I like the way we've changed our culture. Aetna has gone from being a nice place to work to being a great place to work!"

The best way to understand the needs and values of customers from every background is to have employees from every background who speak their language and understand their experiences. But the deepest value of diversity is derived from cultural and intellectual inclusion, not just demographic variation. When employees with a wide range of different sensibilities offer fresh perspectives on the organization and its mission, it helps you tap new sources of knowledge and creativity that will enable your organization to thrive and grow.

Surveys show that many Americans—especially white Americans—assume that racial prejudice is a matter of ancient history, that programs of affirmative action have long since equalized the opportunities available to people of all races, and that therefore deliberate efforts to encourage racial inclusion in US businesses are, at best, unnecessary, and, at worst, divisive and harmful. These assumptions ignore the reality that people of color are still quite rare in American boardrooms and executive suites. They ignore, too, the fact that efforts to integrate US society began only recently in historical terms. I mentioned earlier that landmark laws and court rulings eliminating legal segregation occurred during my own lifetime (and in fact have yet to be fully implemented in practice). I am a

member of the first generation of black Americans to enter historically white institutions—colleges, universities, social organizations, and businesses—in significant numbers. Like practically all other black Americans, I'm familiar with the experience of being the only person of color in a conference room or lecture hall filled with white people. I'm profoundly aware of how awkward and disconcerting it can be to feel culturally isolated from those around you; to encounter no natural role models or mentors when entering a new environment; to be the subject of embarrassing questions, comments, looks, and assumptions; and to be accepted, if at all, merely as a token representative of "my people" who is supposed to speak for an entire race rather than simply myself.

When you have the opportunity to help select new people to join your organization, I urge you to consider inclusion of all kinds as part of the recruitment and hiring process. We live in a world where people from every background are important—as customers, suppliers, investors, and fellow citizens. So organizations need input and contributions from people of all kinds—and the most successful businesses are likely to be those that draw on the widest possible pool of talent.

Demographic diversity often pays immediate, short-term benefits. I've seen it happen many times. Here's an example. When I was at Blue Cross of California, we were once in competition with another health-care company for a major contract with a large corporate client. After both potential suppliers had provided written proposals with contract terms, costs, and other details, the day came for an extensive presentation before a group of executives who would make the final decision. I arrived at the client's offices with my team from Blue Cross. It included our network manager, who was a Hispanic man; our chief actuary, an Asian-American woman; our general manager of geography, another woman; and me, a black man. In the waiting area outside the boardroom where the big presentation would take place, we met our counterparts from the rival supplier. Every member of their team was a blond, blue-eyed male between six feet and six feet three inches tall. We shook hands and wished one another well—and of course we couldn't help noticing the surface differences between

the two teams. Our team from Blue Cross made the second presentation that morning. When we walked into the room, we saw that the members of the client's team were as diverse as we were—there were men and women of various ages, colors, and ethnic backgrounds waiting to hear our presentation. The team was a cross-section of the company's working population—and, like our team, it was also a cross-section of twenty-first-century America. We immediately felt confident that we could "speak the language" of everyone in that room. Blue Cross won the contract.

A key to understanding the strategic intent of people higher than you in the corporate ladder is learning to listen perceptively—developing the ability to hear more than the words that your boss says. Seize every opportunity to hear from your company's top leaders. When a "town hall" meeting is announced, come early, sit in the front row, and be prepared with a question or two related to your work. Even more important than the words your boss utters is the purpose behind those words. Don't simply ask yourself, "What is my boss saying?" but also ask, "Why are they saying it? What is their purpose? What goal are they pursuing? And what role can I play in helping them achieve that goal?" Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2633

My friend JD Hoye has had a successful career in government and the nonprofit arena. She is president of NAF (formerly the National Academy Foundation), which runs a network of career academics located in public high schools that prepare young people for future careers through industry-focused curricula and work experiences. While NAF is a nonprofit organization, Hoye can tell you that the challenges she faces in working with her board of directors are comparable to those faced by the CEO of a for-profit company. Nurturing her relationship with board members is an essential aspect of her work as an effective organizational head, since without the board's support, it's unlikely that Hoye would be able to accomplish the daily work of the organization or pursue any of its long-term goals. Here are some techniques Hoye uses to keep her board members informed, happy, and supportive. Frequent personal communication. Hoye personally sends a letter to each board member monthly, relating current news about the organization, its

short-term plans, and any current challenges. Rich flow of information. Hoye makes sure the members of her management team gather detailed information about the organization's activities, organize the data in a clear and understandable format, and share it on a timely basis with board members. Careful planning for board meetings. The quarterly board meetings are thoroughly planned to be as engaging, informative, and interesting as possible. Advance information on topics to be discussed is provided in a bound book of materials, and time is scheduled for open-ended discussions and question-and-answer periods. Availability as needed between meetings. When a board member calls with a question or concern, Hoye responds promptly or connects the member with a staff member who has special expertise in the subject area. Above all, Hoye tries to consider the role of the board member from that person's perspective: Our board members are very busy people with lots of other responsibilities. Many of them are running companies or other organizations of their own. They are traveling constantly and have schedules that are crowded and unpredictable. They focus on NAF with just a fraction of their time and energy—and we are lucky to have it! So we do everything we can to make working with us a "light lift." We pay attention to their individual needs and interests, we provide them with all the tools they need to understand what we are trying to do, and we listen carefully whenever they communicate with us. Our goal is to make them feel that they are getting as much from the relationship as they are giving—or even more, if possible.

Early in my time as CEO at Aetna, I had an experience that taught me the importance of empowering people to speak up. Our executive committee planned a session with a highly rated outside expert chosen by our innovation group, who was supposed to lead us through a ninety-minute presentation about quality improvement in the insurance industry. At the appointed time, we gathered in the boardroom and the guest speaker began his talk, illustrated with the typical array of PowerPoint slides and handouts. Everyone in the room, I'm sure, was hoping for a highly enlightening, inspiring presentation. But within a few minutes, I began to sense that the speaker knew very little about Aetna or about the insurance industry in general. Everything he said was a vague generality with little value

or relevance to us. I gave him the benefit of the doubt, thinking maybe he simply needed a little time to warm up. After twenty minutes, all doubt was gone. Whoever had selected this speaker had made a huge mistake—and our high-priced executive committee members were embarked on a timewasting exercise that would cost Aetna the equivalent of thousands of dollars. However, I said nothing. Why? Because I was wondering which member of my executive committee would speak up first. I noticed them exchanging glances. A few were even rolling their eyes. It was clear that everyone in the room felt exactly the same as I did. Which leader would have the courage and honesty to call a halt to the charade? The clock kept ticking. The deadly presentation droned on. Bottoms wriggled uncomfortably in chairs. But still, no one said a word. Finally, when an hour had passed, I broke the silence. "I'm sorry to interrupt," I said to the speaker. "But I think you've delivered all the insights and information we can get from you. Thanks very much for your time." He packed up his slides and disappeared. As soon as the door shut behind him, the room exploded with complaints: What a fiasco that was! I didn't learn a single thing. I don't think that guy ever set foot in an insurance company before. Thank goodness that's over with! My ten-year-old could have given a better presentation. I waited for the comments to die down. Then I quietly said, "You all knew I didn't sponsor this speaker. Any one of you could have spoken up. You could have politely tried to focus him on useful topics, or asked for a break so we could devise an exit strategy. Why wait for me to take charge?" A long, embarrassed silence filled the room as everyone absorbed the message. The fiasco had turned into a teaching moment. I'd made it quite clear that I expected everyone who reported to me to be honest and unafraid about communicating what they saw happening around them—even if that meant sharing bad news. From that point on, my team members understood that they were empowered to speak the truth under all circumstances—and that's exactly what they did.

The company's previous leaders had been well aware that worker morale was a problem, and they'd tried hard to study the problem, in part through a continual barrage of surveys asking employees their opinions about everything from human resources policies to

customer service issues. In fact, the surveys had become so frequent and numerous (at last count there were fifty-two surveys being conducted every year) that people stopped taking them seriously. We fixed this by conducting a single annual survey that was thoughtfully designed and administered to yield meaningful results. More important, the surveys had never seemed to result in any visible or substantive changes. We realized we had to figure out how to transform employee surveys into a truly useful leadership tool.

We realized that, at times, addressing the challenge of "doing the right things for the right reasons" required a degree of courage. At Aetna—as at other well-managed health insurance companies—we empowered the chief medical officer in each business division to make the toughest calls regarding coverage of particular services and procedures. These decisions could have significant financial impact, both individually (since some medical procedures involve costs running into the hundreds of thousands of dollars) and cumulatively (when multiplied by thousands of patients). We were honest with our team members about these realities. But we made it clear that the medical officers had final say when it came to clinical decisions. Our business managers were not empowered to override them, regardless of the financial pressures they might be feeling at the time. That's simply the way it has to be when you are in a business like Aetna's, which profoundly affects people's lives.

During my years as CEO, I set myself the goal of visiting every single Aetna facility. I wanted everyone who worked for the company to have a chance to see me and talk to me face-to-face about their work and about what Aetna meant to them. And before my time at the helm was completed, I managed to do just that. When you are a leader, simply showing up—being personally present among the people you are relying on to make your dream a reality—carries enormous symbolic weight. Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3274

It's also possible that race plays a part. I come from an ethnic background that is still unusual among the ranks of top executives. You might say that, in the executive suite, my color alone makes me stand out from the crowd; I have no need to do anything flashy or

dramatic to draw attention to myself. On the other hand, in the eyes of some people, a black executive probably needs to be especially well-prepared, detail-oriented, and thorough in order to demonstrate their mastery of the leadership role. (I'm not accusing anyone of conscious racism. But in a society that has been steeped for generations in various forms of bias, it's almost impossible for anyone to be completely free of subtle, unconsciously prejudiced assumptions.) In reaction to this reality, I have developed a style that relies on logic, clarity, and quiet but firm self-expression rather than flamboyance, charm, or charisma to win and retain the respect of my colleagues. Each of us must play the hand we are dealt. I sometimes joke that if I behaved like some other executives—deploying sharp elbows and a tongue to match—I would be practically unemployable! The leadership style I've gravitated to has worked well for me—just as Mark's very different style has worked well for him.

Chenault's way of linking reality with hope says a lot about how leaders need to develop their vision for the future. It's not about "being a visionary" in some mystical sense—someone with a prophetic gift or the fantastic imagination of a science-fiction writer. Rather, it's about having such a strong, realistic understanding of the nuts and bolts of your current situation that you can clearly picture what the next steps in the naturally unfolding reality are likely to be— as well as the key pressure points where smart leadership, deftly applied, can make a difference, transforming a potentially negative outcome into a positive one.

Each knowledge map took some component of the health insurance business and brought it vividly to life. Sketched out by a team of my direct reports, who were our subject matter experts, the knowledge maps were then reviewed by the executive committee before being turned over to a team of graphic artists for final rendering. This process ensured that the artwork would accurately reflect our company's vision of the industry and our role in it—a job too important to be outsourced to anyone else. To ensure that all employees benefited from the knowledge maps, we developed interactive workshops that brought them to life through questions, answers, and discussion. Each map was supplemented with three

sets of cards like those you might use in a Monopoly game—except that these cards illustrated the Learning Goals for the workshop, the Value We Provide to our constituents, and the Aetna Values that we seek to embody in each of these interactions. A bit corny? Maybe. But Aetna team members enjoyed the activities. Many said it was the first time they'd really understood how health insurance works—which means it was the first time they fully grasped the purpose of their work. Combining visualization with verbal explanations gave everyone the same model, or mental image, for Aetna's operations. It helped to ensure that everyone was finally on the same page. Having everyone at Aetna participate in one of these workshops gave us a set of common ideas, images, and tools that we could refer to while developing and implementing business strategies.

Making close personal connections with people can be a challenge for me. I'm a reserved man, unaccustomed to showing my emotions in public. In my judgment, too many leaders act as if they're the most important person in any room. I've always tried to behave in the opposite way—as if the focus should be on the job at hand, and never on me. So I've developed the habit of playing down my personal feelings. Maybe I went a little too far, since some of the people I worked with began to wonder whether I had any feelings in the first place! But there were moments when circumstances broke down my reserve and revealed my softer side to my colleagues. My longtime communications director Jill Griffiths recalls one of the rare times I teared up in public. It happened while I was paying tribute to a longtime Aetna colleague upon his retirement. People who knew me were somewhat stunned at this rare show of emotion—and some assumed it must have been planned in advance. "Afterward," Jill says, "I received dozens of emails complimenting me: 'It was brilliant of you to get Ron to cry in a meeting! How on earth did you do it?' It was hard to convince them that it had happened spontaneously!" If I had it to do over, I'd probably reveal my emotions a little more on a daily basis. My friend, former Xerox CEO Ursula Burns, offers this advice to ambitious young people: Some people say that a leader should never let people see her sweat. I think that's wrong. You have to let them see you sweat! People need to see that you're human . . . that you have weaknesses, flaws, and vulnerabilities. That you don't

necessarily have all the answers. When they see this, it motivates them to contribute more—to step up with solutions to the problems you are grappling with. It helps them realize you're all in this together, a team of mere mortals working together to make big things happen . . . We need more personal leadership in America. I think that being a real person on the job, and sharing that real personality with the people around you, helps keep you on an even keel. I think it can help keep you from falling into the trap that some CEOs have fallen into—the trap of making bad decisions or violating the law because of hubris or an exaggerated sense of self. I want to always remember that I am just Ursula Burns, an ordinary person with my strengths and weaknesses—not some kind of Powerful Person moving pieces around on a chessboard.

I was particularly disappointed when The Wall Street Journal, a respected and highly influential publication known for its probusiness positions, carelessly mischaracterized my position on the individual mandate, one of the key provisions of the Obama administration's health insurance reform program. An op-ed article I wrote for the Journal was given the headline, "Why I No Longer Support the Health Insurance Mandate," which was a misleading and oversimplified summary of my position. My purpose in the article was to say that the financial penalty assessed by the law on individuals who failed to buy health insurance should be described as a tax, which in fact it is. As I've noted, I'm a big believer in the importance of using language clearly and accurately, and in this case I think the Obama team and its supporters in Congress were guilty of fudging their terminology for political reasons, which is usually a mistake. In fact, my point was ultimately supported by none other than the US Supreme Court, which upheld the constitutionality of the individual mandate in the ACA on the grounds that it actually levies a tax—which the administration was well within its rights to do. The lesson I took from this incident: Try to avoid letting somebody else control the way in which your message is framed. If at all possible, at least reserve the right to critique the headline before it appears in print. When you serve as a public spokesperson for any position, always try to own and control your own words. That way, you can minimize the chance that others will distort and misuse them.

I also regard Barack Obama's presidency as a phenomenal moment in the history of our country. President Obama faced an enormous set of challenges. He didn't necessarily fully understand the business world, but he did his best to listen and learn about it using input from a variety of sources, while balancing what he learned against political realities. Obama's willingness to listen and learn is an important value all leaders need to embrace.

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