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## Abstract

Leadership starts with leading oneself before leading others. Purpose is a foundational aspect thereby. This chapter defines a perspective on leadership that may not be the most common one, but is highly identifiable for people of any age group and in any stage of life. It discusses five interrelated qualities in finding our purpose: (1) awareness, which enhances the quality of decisions we make; (2) respect, which is an outflow of awareness and ensures proper treatment of others; (3) morality, which enables us to consider and deal with the consequences of our decisions; (4) vision, which guides our path and attracts others to it; and (5) understanding, which can help us adjust our direction if we find it to become unfulfilling. Cases are presented for each quality, discussing global and business leaders such as Muhammad Yunus; Princess Diana; Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface; Sir Richard Branson; and Nelson Mandela. The chapter ends with a brief narrative on finding our purpose, inviting the reader to engage in self-reflective questions, responding to them, and defining his or her own life's purpose.

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## Introduction

*Purposeless living is an aimless drift with no satisfactory landing over time.  
Purposeless leading is injustice to self and others: a downright crime.*

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Purpose is not the most common term that comes to mind when we think and talk about leadership. Strategy, action, profits, stakeholders, shareholders, production, resources, supply, or expansion: these are the more common words that are being brought in connection with leading, but purpose is just as underlying a term as its meaning is. Purpose is a major concept: it has many layers of meaning to it. When thinking about purpose in leadership, we can, of course, think in numerous directions, such as the purpose of one particular action toward a person or a group of people or the purpose of developing a new product line and, possibly, the purpose of integrating or diversifying the organization's activities or of changing its structure from product line based to departmental or market based. However, each of the above-listed purposes is related to actions: they are mostly strategic in nature and are consequences of situations that have arisen.

This chapter does not discuss those types of purposes, even though we readily admit that they are crucial for any leadership performance. However, the intention is to dive deeper and look at the very core of leading as a purposeful pursuit.

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## Leadership: Setting the Stage

Leadership is one of the most explored topics in scholarly circles, probably because it is so near and dear to our self-image: most people, especially those with ambitions to progress in life, see themselves as a leader. Not only has the list of leadership theories significantly grown in the past decades, but the perspective on leadership itself varies broadly as well. Some authors choose to perceive it as a complex process with multiple dimensions, predominantly focused on influencing others (Northouse, 2015). The three elements that are traditionally considered to determine a leadership situation are the leader, the followers, and the situation. A standard observation in leadership books and articles has been that leadership is a process, which involves influence, occurs in groups, and comprises common goals (Northouse, 2015). This notion makes perfect sense, as long as leadership is considered within a professional setting, where a leader formulates and instills guidelines and guidance to a group of followers in order to attain predefined goals (Mastrangelo, Eddy, & Lorenzet, 2004).

One critical component missing from the explanations above is the fact that leadership does not start in a formal organizational setting. Before leadership can expand into a process of influencing others toward common goals, it has to first and foremost emerge and mature internally (Marques, 2014). The famous management theorist Peter Drucker was also a major proponent of this perspective of leadership as a personal relationship. Drucker frequently emphasized that we should ensure and solidify our personal relationship as chief executive officer of ourselves. He affirmed that we should regularly strengthen our inner-connection so that we remained in touch with our sense of purpose, which would then be instrumental in finding our place in society, the choices we would make, the way we would learn, our approach to others, the values we held, the way we would contribute, as well as keep us aware of our strengths and weaknesses (Drucker, 2005). Self-leadership is

an appealing and uplifting concept, which, when practiced effectively, can lead to self-motivation and a rewarding performance path (Manz & Sims, 1991). Self-motivation is a powerful driving motive toward performing. It is often referred to as intrinsic motivation (Furtner, Baldegger, & Rauthmann, 2013), which encourages us to engage in self-examination and define what inspires us to the extent that we really want to do it.

## **A Personal Relationship**

In the above section, we introduced the perspective of first being a leader of ourselves before becoming one to others. This perspective indicates that leadership does not necessarily entail holding a formal position of power. Many people are great leaders, even though they don't hold formal leadership positions at their work or in any other formal setting. Similarly, many people are no leaders at all, even though they have somehow landed in formal power positions. "Leading oneself is the exact starting point of leadership. This concept is important in understanding the essence of leadership" (Noda, 2004, p. 17).

Real leadership has everything to do with how we perceive ourselves and how we behave. Leadership requires self-respect and self-control. A person who engages in such behavioral patterns will oftentimes be observed or even admired by others, who may decide to adopt some of this person's qualities. Without performing in a formal leadership position, this person has become a leader in the eyes of those who seek to imitate him or her.

In this chapter, we treat leadership as a personal relationship, ignited by inner passion for a goal, and manifested through strong behavior. When perceived as such, leadership becomes part of each of our lives, even though each of us determines for ourselves how far we pursue it. We all "lead our lives," and how we do that says a lot about how we could lead others.

As indicated earlier, some people become "leaders" of organizations, thanks to family ties and relationships or as a result of successfully profiling themselves. In many cases, the end result turns out to be less than satisfactory. Most of us can recall a "leader" or "manager" that we had less than average respect for, even though this person held a formal leadership position. At the same time, most of us can also recall a person who may not have held a formal leadership position, but who carries him- or herself with such dignity and with a sense of purpose that we were drawn to this person, wanted to walk in his or her footsteps, and frequently approached this person for advice.

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## **Purpose in Leading**

As crucial as purpose is to leadership, as difficult does it seem to find writings that have focused on this concept. Acclaimed leadership scholar Warren Bennis once wrote "The No. 1 requirement for a leader ... [is] a strongly defined sense of

purpose” (Loeb, 1994, p. 242). Graham (2011) includes purpose as one of the foundational elements in her concept of “soul leadership,” along with passion, possibilities, and place. Graham feels that this combination encourages individuals and organizations to be the best possible version of themselves. Jacobs and Longbotham (2011) have engaged in a phenomenological study, through which they found that processes such as seeking counsel of trusted individuals, praying, and reflecting helped establish a higher purpose in leaders, consisting of the desire to minimize the discrepancy between their spiritual beliefs and the current conditions in their environment. Craig and Snook (2014) describe the growth in interest for purpose-driven leadership, coming from multiple sides at the same time: academics, business professionals, psychologists, and even medical doctors—they all claim that purpose is a goal, success, and life enhancer. They place, at the opposite end of this observation, their own finding, which leads to the disheartening realization that not even 20% of leaders are strongly aware of their own individual purpose. Craig and Snook distinguish between leaders’ identification with their organization’s purpose, which they generally know very well, and their identification with their own personal purpose, which is where they pitifully fall short. With such a meager percentage of leaders being aware of their purpose, it is understandable that the number of leaders who have an actual plan of action to achieve their purpose is even lower. Yet, as Craig and Snook maintain, “Purpose is [...] the key to navigating the complex world we face today, where strategy is ever changing and few decisions are obviously right or wrong” (p. 107). If, therefore, we fail to identify our leadership purpose, we will be unable to develop and follow a plan to bring it into action and thereby achieve our most desired goals in both personal and professional regard (Craig & Snook, 2014).

Indeed, purpose is a deeply rooted, personal, and spiritual phenomenon that uniquely defines each of us and can help us achieve the impact we would otherwise only dream of. As Craig and Snook emphasize, purpose is not *what* we do, but *how* and *why* we do it. Purpose is therefore closely aligned with qualities such as awareness, respect, morality, vision, and understanding. Each of these qualities deserves a brief explanation, so that it may become clear how it should be perceived within the scope of this chapter.

## Awareness

Just like purpose, awareness is a term that can be interpreted and applied in many ways. Some people feel that awareness should not be treated as stand-alone subject, but in conjunction with specifics. For instance, one could have awareness of religious diversity, or awareness of governmental injustice. Yet, awareness could also be treated as a heightened level of perceiving and considering circumstances. In this context, awareness should be thought of as a path toward increased insight. Awareness is a critical quality, because it enables us to take more factors into consideration than the obvious. A person with expanded awareness makes decisions with long-term consequences in mind and will not engage in behaviors that are in conflict with his or her moral beliefs. In order to understand our moral beliefs,

however, we need to be self-aware, in order to ensure that our behavior is aligned with our deepest convictions (Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Sparrowe, 2005). In a discussion about authentic leadership, one of the developing theories of the day, Alok (2014) affirms that authentic leaders have high levels of self-awareness and that self-awareness requires intense awareness of how we define ourselves and how our actions affect others. It also entails awareness of our “values, emotions, goals, motives, strengths and weaknesses” (p. 268).

### Case Study 1.1: Banking for the Poor

A remarkable leader with heightened awareness is Muhammad Yunus, the only businessperson so far who won a Nobel Peace Prize. Yunus, who was an economics professor and who returned to his home country Bangladesh shortly after its independence, regularly took strolls in the village outside the campus where he was teaching. On his strolls, he increasingly became aware of the plight of the poor people, who seemed to be unable to rise above their pitiful state. He started wondering what their problem was and engaged in conversations with them. This is how he learned why the poor micropreneurs were not able to accumulate any savings, let alone wealth: the banks were unwilling to grant them even the smallest loan, and the moneylenders in the field were like sharks—they demanded almost all of the profits from any project as interest for the money they loaned to the people, thus disabling them from ever accumulating any funds and keeping them in an enslaved position. Further investigation from Yunus brought to light that traditional banks were, indeed, unwilling to loan any money to the less fortunate, because they believed that these people would not pay back their debts. Even after Yunus started a project with his economics class, lending the money out of his own pocket to the people and getting 100% back, the banks were unwilling to change their stance. As a result, Yunus started Grameen Bank, which means village bank, focusing on providing loans to the poor and working toward making poverty history.

Had Yunus not acquired the awareness of the needs of the poor people in the villages, he might have remained a teacher of elegant economic theories, unaware of and uncaring about the plight of so many of his fellow Bangladeshi citizens. His heightened awareness drove him to make courageous decisions that changed the status quo and defied longstanding, wrong beliefs from traditional money lending institutions.

## Respect

Respect is a virtue, which, as management expert Tom Peters rightfully claims, we gain by giving. “[I]f you give people unstinting respect and a chance to learn and grow and be of service and be proud of what they do and who they do it with—good stuff will happen” (Peters, 2010, p. 3). Clarke (2011) identifies three different types of respect: appraisal, recognition, and identification respect, in which appraisal

respect is based on the value we attribute to a perceived quality within someone, identification respect results from the recognition of common values between involved persons, and recognition respect pertains to the impartial, dignified, morally responsible way we treat others. While we acknowledge the value of all three types, it is mainly the recognition type of respect, in which leaders treat people in an equal and unbiased, trustworthy manner, that we specifically refer to here.

Respect is one of those interesting concepts that accumulates rather than diminishes when you start applying it. Respecting others is a sign of acknowledging their value and appreciating them for who and what they are. While arrogance is an easy trap to fall into as we get higher up the performance ladder and think that we have achieved all our feats on our own, respect is the way of the mindful leader. Respect for others guides the decisions we make. Respect should therefore be seen as a strong pillar of purposeful leadership.

### Case Study 1.2: The People's Princess

An exemplary leader in this regard was Princess Diana, who died in 1997, but who remains, to this day, a role model to many. Diana was called "The People's Princess" for a reason: she knew how to connect beyond the superficial level and showed genuine respect to people from all walks of life. She consoled the suffering and was convinced that everyone should be valued, because everyone holds potential (Nguyen, 2014). On the day Diana died in a car crash in Paris, another brave woman, Mother Teresa, immediately sent a condolence telegram, stating "She was very concerned for the poor. She was very anxious to do something for them. That is why she was close to me" (*Mother & Diana shared mutual respect*, 1997, 4). Mother Teresa and Princess Diana have both entered the annals of history as respectable women who changed the world for the better through their care for the deprived and suffering. The two women had last met a few months prior to Diana's death, at a convent in New York, and both died within a week from each other. Diana died on August 31, and Mother Teresa passed away on September 5 1997.

While Princess Diana had her own share of challenges in life, or perhaps *because* of that, she could relate vividly with other people's plights. Having struggled with bulimia for a long time, as well as the pressures of being married into an English royalty and then divorced, she was familiar with the capricious turns of life and carried with her a large dose of empathy, which drove her to choose for bringing hope to those in dire situations rather than living the life of a wealthy social butterfly. In her relatively short life, Princess Diana visited numerous hospitals in many countries, paying respect to those who suffered from leprosy, aids, and other feared diseases and touched them, thereby increasing awareness within a global audience that the fear of having physical contact with these people is largely misplaced. She also visited refugee camps, raised funds for cancer and heart disease research, and supports the call against landmines, visiting many victims of landmine explosions in Angola (*Princess Diana Remembered*, n.d.). By giving respect, Diana earned it and found purpose in her life, even when she was devastated by her personal marital and health problems.

## Morality

Being in touch with one's values and beliefs is critical, not only for the type of decisions we make but definitely for dealing with the consequences in the short and long term. The pressure increases, as we take on responsibilities in life, to make those decisions that will result in the greatest support for the bottom line and our wallets. However, such decisions oftentimes stand in stark contrast to our morals. The shortcut to wealth, fame, prestige, and power usually requires actions that may cause us to lose sight of our True North (George, 2007), causing us to become sidetracked, losing touch with our purpose, and doing things we will have to deal with at a later stage in our lives. Thinking about problems with our conscience 20 or 30 years down the line is something not many lie awake from, especially not when the here and now is so enticing, demanding, and can be so lucrative! Still, it is the right thing to do, and it is essential in defining and solidifying our purpose as leaders.

Morality, as a leadership trait, is a complex concept, as it can be considered and practiced at different levels. Palmer (2009) distinguishes between three different levels of analyses in leaders' moral behavior: (1) focusing on the leader's personal ethics, which encourages a leader to adopt ethically sound behaviors, in both personal and professional regards; (2) focusing on the way a leader exercises his or her leadership, which can either pertain to the actual actions of the leader in his or her position, or the style the leader adheres to; and (3) focusing on the moral depth of the leadership that is exerted, whereby others are moved toward a common vision and how that can be achieved. Palmer stresses that leadership morality is only complete when it encompasses all three levels.

### Case Study 1.3: A Moral Awakening

Business as usual can be immoral, and the path toward finding purpose through moral actions has been strongly portrayed by Ray Anderson, former CEO of Interface, one of the world's largest carpet-producing corporations. Having started the company in 1973, Anderson considered his business performance fine as long as it remained within the boundaries of the law. Yet, about 20 years into his leadership, a number of things happened that drastically changed his perspective and leadership purpose. A research team in his company presented him the question that was asked with increasing frequency by stakeholders: what was Interface doing to secure the environment? Anderson realized that the answer to this question was "very little." Around the same time, he read books such as Paul Hawken's *The Ecology of Commerce* and Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael*, and his paradigm shifted. He experienced a rude awakening, along with the sudden understanding that his acts, as well as those of so many industrial leaders, were disastrous to our planet and its inhabitants, and engaged in behavior as he has done would 1 day land in prison. Anderson devoted his years after this major turnaround to a continuous quest toward sustainable performance, which was not always easy, especially not in his line

(continued)

**Case Study 1.3:** (continued)

of production: carpet production requires large extractions from the environment and leads to massive amounts of unrecyclable waste. Still, Interface made progress in the right direction by setting up a seven-step plan toward increased sustainability.

Anderson did not limit his actions to sustainable production for his own company: he became a very vocal advocate for sustainable business, as he felt that this was the least he could do to increase awareness about a moral way of performing. He spoke on public forums and contributed to more than 100 books, consistently emphasizing the most important purpose for business today: the pursuit of sustainability. Ray Anderson passed away in 2011, but the trend he set in for his company is continued by his successors, and his message to other business leaders has reached many and is still morally waking up leaders to this day.

**Vision**

Vision is arguably one of the most compelling factors that distinguish leaders from managers. Managers have been described as individuals who are concerned with the day-to-day implementation of the performance process (whether production or service), but leaders are the ones that define the long-term direction. Berson, Shamir, Avolio, and Popper (2001) attest that the skill of having and communicating a compelling vision distinguishes transformational leaders from transactional ones. This is the same distinction that is also made between leaders and managers (see above). Managers use a transactional approach to set goals, while leaders use transformational influence to entice followers (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Vision, as a critical element of transformational influence, can be defined as “a set of idealized goals established by the leader that represent a perspective shared by followers” (Conger & Kanungo, 1998, p. 156). The inspirational strength of a leader’s vision depends on the leader’s style, his or her role characteristics, and the context in which the vision is presented (Berson et al., 2001). This triangular set of dimensions has an interesting overlap with Palmer’s earlier presented analysis levels for leaders’ morality.

Once we understand that vision requires insight into attaining future paths toward success, it becomes clear that purpose is a closely related concept: in order to determine and develop a vision, and translate it into a plan, a purpose has to be clear. Strange and Mumford (2002) add that a leader’s sense of purpose starts with reflection on past experiences, which leads to a vision that inspired followers.



### Case Study 1.4: The Visionary Octopus

The business world has presented us with some interesting visionaries in the past decades. In this section, we discuss one of these: Sir Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Empire. Branson, a high school dropout due to his troubles with reading and comprehension caused by dyslexia, demonstrated his visionary skills from early stages on. He managed to convert a small magazine, named *Student*, into a major publication by selling advertising space and thus enlarging its prints, reach, and revenues. One thing led to another: he started a mail-order company named “Virgin” and added a record shop, followed by a recording studio. He quickly gravitated from beginning artists to more seasoned and popular ones, and Virgin ultimately became one of the largest record labels in the world.

Over the past decades, Branson demonstrated his visionary skills time and again, divesting some lines of his business and attracting or creating others, thus remaining one step ahead of the trend. His entrepreneurial insights have led him down some surprising, revolutionary paths, which he could not have foreseen in earlier years, such as a transatlantic airline and a plan to start offering commercial trips into space. Richard Branson’s Virgin Group now comprises more than 200 companies operating in more than 30 countries. Particularly in the industry, he has been known to partake in major airline transactions in Belgium, Australia, Nigeria, the United States, and elsewhere (Zaveloff, 2011). His entrepreneurial genius was rewarded with knighthood in 1999, and he remains well-liked due to his accessibility and openness to new challenges.

## Understanding

Understanding, used here in the sense of realizing what is at stake and what really matters to stakeholders, is at least as crucial in the scheme of purpose as the other traits mentioned earlier. Even when stakeholders cannot fully comprehend the importance of certain steps, a good leader has to be aware of the best strategies to reach the most advantageous long-term goals. It means that a good leader has to develop the ability to change the strategy when he or she finds out that initial directions did not serve the real purpose and develop new paths to attain responsible goals. This leads us back to the reality that leaders have to first and foremost lead themselves and be mindful of the needs and reasons for directional changes. “The consciousness of leading oneself is fostered by deeply understanding the nature of people, human behavior, the significance of civilization, and history and by exploring our own views of the universe” (Noda, 2004, p. 17). When making decisions of major magnitude, we have to be in touch with our purpose and understand what we live for. We have to consider our values and attune our actions to those (Noda, 2004).

### Case Study 1.5: Understanding What Really Matters

South Africa's former president Nelson Mandela truly lived the concept of understanding. After his youthful force toward equality, and the realization that those strategies were unsuccessful, Mandela changed his strategy as he spent 27 years in prison, mellowing into wisdom and dialogue as the ways to achieve anything. As a young law student, Mandela became involved in the African National Congress (ANC), particularly around the time when the apartheid system (racial segregation) became formalized (Nelson, 2014). The movement was focused on fierce and armed resistance in those early days. The volatile climate in the country led to numerous arrests, and Mandela was jailed multiple times. Yet, when he landed in prison for 27 years, Mandela used the time in captivity to reevaluate his life and his purpose as a person. He started studying Afrikaans, even though some of his comrades in prison were not in favor of that. They saw learning Afrikaans as a way of giving into the oppressors, while Mandela understood that one has to understand the language of one's opponent in order to develop a better strategy. He remained a proud man, devoted to his cause, and declined several options to get his prison term shortened if he would promise to give up on his fight against apartheid. In 1990, global awareness and support for Mandela had reached the magnitude that then-president De Klerk had to lift the ban on the ANC and release Mandela. Mandela's greatest strength in his post-prison years was a life without bitterness, but with understanding why things had to happen the way they did, even though that did not make them right. Most importantly, his balanced approach led to his presidency in 1994 and to being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, along with De Klerk. In the years after his presidency, Mandela became an advocate of social rights and brought the discussion about aids into the open and out of obscurity. He passed away in 2013 at the age of 95 (Fig. 1.1).

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## Finding Your Purpose

Knowing your purpose is a fulfilling fact. Finding it is not always easy, however. The most important thought to hold here is that your company's purpose or the purpose others feel you should have is not the same as your own purpose. As has been communicated throughout this chapter, your purpose is a personal commitment you make toward your life, and you live it throughout the stages you encounter, whether you are at the highest pinnacle or in the deepest dale. Your purpose is who you are and how you behave throughout circumstances. "To find your purpose, you must first understand yourself, your passions, and your underlying motivations" (George, 2003, p. 19). It is therefore easiest to find your purpose through reflection. When you review your life and consider the things you did from a young age on, what made you feel excited and passionate? What are your most important strengths, and what are the things you enjoy doing most? If you can identify a common theme in all those reflections, you are likely to define your purpose within minutes from that recognition. If the reflection exercise does not bring a purpose to light, it might be helpful to gather a small group of people

**Fig. 1.1** Five components that help determine a leader's purpose



who have proper insight into what makes you tick. Chances are that they can help you recognize what has been standing right in front of you, even though you couldn't see it.

### Chapter Summary

- Leadership begins with leading ourselves. We can only expand leadership into a process of influencing others toward common goals, if we first and foremost develop and nurture it internally.
- Purpose is the most foundational requirement for a leader to be a good one. Failing to identify our leadership purpose will render us incompetent to achieve our most desired goals.
- Purpose is closely aligned with qualities such as awareness, respect, morality, vision, and understanding.
  - A person with expanded awareness makes decisions with long-term consequences in mind and will not engage in behaviors that are in conflict with his or her moral beliefs.
  - Respect is a virtue, which we gain by giving. Respecting others is a sign of acknowledging their value and appreciating them for who and what they are.
  - Being in touch with one's moral values is critical, not only for the type of decisions we make but definitely for dealing with the consequences in the short and long term.
  - Vision is arguably one of the most compelling factors that distinguish leaders from managers. Having and communicating a compelling vision distinguishes transformational leaders from transactional ones.
  - Understanding, used here in the sense of realizing what really matters, means that a leader has to be able to change the strategy when he or she finds out that initial directions did not serve the real purpose and develop new paths to attain responsible goals.
- To find our purpose, we must first understand ourselves, our passions, and our underlying motivations. We can best find our purpose through reflection.

### Discussion Questions

1. The chapter considers leadership to start as a personal relationship before it can develop into a relationship with others. How do you feel that you currently exert leadership in your life?
2. How did awareness serve as a leadership purpose tool for Muhammad Yunus?
3. Princess Diana is still widely revered today, many years after her passing. How did her attitude of giving respect contribute to this ongoing popularity?
4. In the case of Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface, a moral awakening resulted in a paradigm shift and a purpose definition. What would you say was Anderson's purpose after his awakening?
5. Consider the exercise questions in the section "Finding Your Purpose." Then, reflect on these questions and try to formulate your life's purpose, as you currently see it. If necessary, form a small group with people who know you well to assist you. Present your purpose statement as a response to this question.

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