

The Ten Truths of Leadership

By Mike Morrison

Introduction

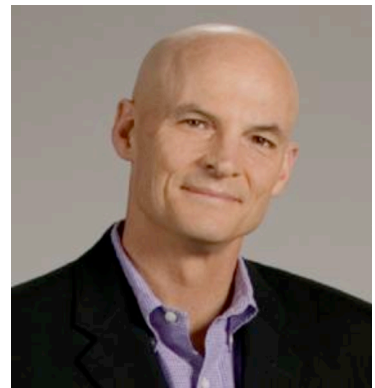
You will find this quote on the column that sits in the middle of my office:

“In the middle of the road of my life I awoke in the dark wood where the true way was wholly lost.”

Dante Alighieri -- Italian poet of the 13th Century

It has always served as an important reminder to me on how elusive meaning can be in both our work and personal lives. With the perfect storm wreaking its havoc on our markets and our lives – none of us have the luxury of watching this one from the sidelines. Even the most optimistic projections for recovery suggest a deep and painful correction period that will be measured in years – not months.

This economic Tsunami has also presented a life-changing opportunity for each of us. However, the real dilemma we are facing cannot be reduced solely to economic terms. The real issues are revealed in Dante’s reflection. Three points stand out:



1. We are in the middle of the road of our lives. We are feeling the full sense of vulnerability that comes from standing alone in the middle of the road. Gone is the pre-ordained success that seemed to propel us forward – allowing us to live our lives in a future state that was “somewhere” down the road.

But for now we are “here” and with it comes the realization that until we can get comfortable with “here” – our happiness and sense of peace will always be lost in a distant “there” that we never fully reach.

2. We have awoken in the dark wood. Could anything be more frightening than to awake in a dark and strange place? Life can feel that way today – especially in our inner, private world where darkness represents the cumulative fears, unresolved dilemmas, and the “promised” internal conversations that never happen. The darkness can even emerge in our dreams – as our subconscious gives way to an inner self-talk that is more about fear than hope – more about survival than flourishing.

However, there is also hope in this statement. To awake is to also be reborn – to be aware again – fully present to the possibilities. Awakening in the darkness reminds us that our chance for a new life will not be tied to what is familiar or comfortable. Amazingly, the darkness begins to lose its hold on us – emboldening us to confront all that is right and wrong with our current place in the world.

3. Where the true way was wholly lost. In our “sleepwalking” state, we keep following the wrong God home – buying into the illusion that we could find success and security through “having” – having this stuff, having this relationship, having this degree, having this job, having these friends.

In the darkness we always get to see our true selves – a truly humbling but hopeful experience as we now see with absolute clarity that the true path is in “being” – not “having.” We learn to stop believing in the career and place a newfound confidence in our calling.

In this time of profound change, we find ourselves ready for the renewal – and ready to face the truth about ourselves. In that spirit, I present the ten truths of leadership.

Truth #1

A true leader will never waste a good crisis (and will invent them in their absence)!

Insight: Leadership is the process of creating meaningful change and nothing sets the stage for change like a good crisis. Organizations are designed for stability and steadiness – and will always cower in a crisis (it is their nature). Leaders at all levels know this and often find that their deepest strength – and their most significant opportunities – are found in times of great vulnerability. When leaders tap into the vulnerability of self and others, they are “cultivating an openness” to new possibilities that traditionally lay dormant when life is proceeding with its normal bumps and bruises.

But here’s the challenge: Research shows that human beings react more strongly to negative occurrences than to positive ones – with a crisis most assuredly putting people into a defensive “hunker down” mode. In other words, the bad news will always trump any positive news. Only “consistently positive communications” are powerful enough to counter the survival mindset. In fact, research also shows that positive communications (e.g., statements that are supportive, appreciative, recognize others, and express hope) is the **single most important factor** in predicting organizational performance. With this in mind, I propose a “three-step” process for leading meaningful change in times of crisis:

Step One: Don’t just tell the truth, tell a story! It starts with a willingness to define the current reality in its most honest terms – signaling to all involved that the current path is simply not sustainable. The true leader knows that in sharing the full truth – with all of its warts – creates a shared accountability that will drive the highest potential for personal change. However, facts without meaning will only drive us into survival mode. One leader that I know has created a compelling time line that shows how the organization has always emerged stronger after a crisis. He has framed the current crisis as

part of a great legacy – linking the employees to lasting, long-term outcomes that elevate their status and performance. Simply put, information without meaning or context will simply not inspire.

Step Two: Set the change agenda – but make it personal! The next phase not only requires that we set a compelling new agenda that will pull us from our current reality – we need to “personalize” it. In other words, to achieve this new vision, what will be different about us?

Gandhi said it best: “Be the change you want to see in the world.” The leader needs to create clarity around the types of new skills, capabilities, and most importantly – the attitudes and mindsets that we need to embody to achieve the change we seek. **Fact:** When people are engaging in work that is personally important to them, a whole range of positive outcomes are produced (e.g., increased commitment, satisfaction, and performance). We move from compliance and identification with the vision to the much more powerful “internalization” state where we become the change we seek.

Step Three: Focus on “climate” more than culture! Climate refers to the current and most prevalent feelings (positive vs. negative) in the work environment. Culture refers to the on-going steady state of “how we do things around here” – and tends to support the status quo – even during a crisis. Over time, the culture ceiling will grow to include new behaviors – but our crisis demands a more urgent response. Hence, the leader will need to focus on climate – creating a decisively positive emotional environment. Research documents the wide range of positive outcomes associated with positive emotions (e.g., improved problem-solving, higher collaboration, and enhanced productivity) – and the adverse consequences when negative emotions prevail.

Not easy! This is no easy task as leaders must maintain a daily vigil of positive communications that will significantly outweigh the routine occurrence of negative information, barriers, and setbacks. Typically, leaders underestimate – **by a factor of 100** – the importance of on-going, positive communications.

Truth #2

The most enabling act of leadership is the conversation.

To be a little provocative, I often tell people the following: I can teach you everything you need to know about leadership in just five minutes (all of it is in this newsletter!) – but it will take a lifetime to master the skills.

We start with our simple three-word definition of leadership:

Creating meaningful change

Change is inevitable – but meaningful change is not. Without the creation of meaning, the change initiative will not gain the buy-in and commitment needed to overcome the countless barriers that will inevitably emerge.

Leaders are now beginning to understand that the true pathway to meaning is the conversation. Something special develops between the leader and the team when they begin to converse regularly.

But let's be clear: To converse is to engage in a true dialogue – it is where questions are framed, insights are shared, points-of-view are exchanged, and new meaning is sought. There is no room for hierarchy or pre-determined agendas in a conversation. In fact, the leader must learn to create some distance from the urgencies of the workday to allow the conversation to fully occur.

If successful, the leader and team will begin to develop a deep trust and a richer understanding of each person's point of view. Over time, a larger body of meaning is created through the one-on-one and small groups sessions.

For most, the experience is the opposite. In our work lives, we rarely feel that we are in true conversation. There simply is a lack of

mutual exploration, spirited inquiry, or the shaping of new collective meanings. We dutifully respond to questions, provide activity updates, and re-confirm our action plans.

Truth be told: We hate most meetings because they define our work lives in small, meaningless ways and suppress the larger story that needs to be told. As leaders, we need to reclaim and protect time for true conversation.

Here's how you do it: Put your weekly work schedule in front of you. For just a moment, look beyond the “have to do’s” that keep the ship running and think about the conversations you “need to have” to create the meaningful change you seek.

Answer this question: What conversations do I need to have this week and with whom? Invite these “others” to participate in a conversation for change – don’t just send a meeting request. Learn to build conversations into the day – and never let a day escape without meaningful dialogue.

Over time you will find a new truth: Leadership is not only about the conversation – leadership is the conversation.

Truth #3

It is better to “lie” than to “spin”

It is better to lie than to spin? Hmmmm . . . how could that be?

When we are lying – we know it is not the truth. It’s a little different with spin. Spin has gotten so pervasive and acceptable – the truth has become this vast gray area with expanding boundaries. We exaggerate, over-promise, shade things, embellish, slant, skew, show-the-best-side, promote, push and position.

Let’s think this through.

We see the problem first and foremost in “marketing spin.” Marketing spin is the process of creating illusions of value while keeping reality hidden. Like an embellished resume, everything good about the offering is highlighted, promoted, positioned, and exaggerated – while ignoring the “whole truth.” Advertisers certainly know how to present a product or service in its most attractive associations.

Unfortunately, spin will ultimately erode brand value. While the brand (and brand management) is supposed to raise the level of integrity between the product and the customer – marketing spin undermines that relationship by distorting reality. In other words, my experience with the product does not match up with its promise!

Our personal lives are no stranger to spin either. In some way we all have something to sell. But here’s the problem. We tend to “spin” everything. Whether it’s our resumes (I would like to meet the person in my resume!) – the stories we tell – or the presentations we make at work – the data is always skewed in some way. We position things. Leave other things out. We put our best foot forward continuously.

Our report to the boss that makes current business conditions appear to be better than they truly are – is spin!

Spin. We do it naturally and continuously. Next time you tell your favorite story – try to assess how far it has moved from the actual event (just how big was that fish?). In the process of spinning, we lose connection with reality. We lose our feel and need for the truth. And because spin is so pervasive –it requires new capabilities in trust detection (e.g., what can I actually believe in the presentation I just heard?).

So, here's your challenge. Try this for one week. Unflinchingly tell the truth.

Be as realistic as possible. (You can still add emotion to a story or presentation without distorting the truth – or spinning.) When you tell that story – stick to what actually happened. Keep it real. When in a position to self-promote or embellish – give the real answer. Notice that there is an authenticity that emerges that is actually quite appealing. It is the same authenticity that we look for on the other side of your card.

Truth #4

True leaders live only one life at a time.

It is impossible to have a discussion around leadership without exploring it in the context of our lives. The reality is that ***we simply do not have the capacity to maintain separate identities and purposes for our work and personal lives.*** If we try, we will lose the integrity and wholeness needed to lead our selves and others. So, it is essential that our leadership voice be supported by our personal purpose in life.

Our personal purpose can only be understood and developed through the pursuit of “meaning” -- a never-ending conversation we have with ourselves over a lifetime. The clarity, constancy, and courage reflected in these internal conversations will be critical to creating a meaningful life. Earning a living has never had quite the same sense of fulfillment as living a life. As we are able to make small steps in finding and developing our meanings, we are rewarded with a deep sense of participation that can overcome the powerlessness that one feels in life. We increasingly learn more about ourselves from each experience and the confidence we gain allows us to lean into our challenges.

As can be expected, the journey toward a meaningful life requires deliberate intentions that we act on every day. Without the stability of clear meanings in our lives, we can get so busy that we lose track of who we are. When courage needs to be summoned, we falter. We are under great pressure to protect ourselves from the relentless external pressures to succeed by reducing the expectations for our lives, creating a safety from certain losses that will occur when we put our meanings on the line. Instead of growing, we shrink from our true selves.

The reality is that meaning cannot be achieved without being actively sought – requiring thinking, reflection, and learning. As commonplace as these activities might appear, the reality is quite the opposite. We

simply don't take the time to go off-line to purposely decode the meaning attached to our actions. To neglect this exploration into our inner world is to miss out on the core essence of what it means to be human.

Finding our meanings does three important things in creating a meaningful life:

- 1. Promotes stability.** Meaning creates stability around change – allowing us to move easily and more comfortably to the change we desire. Since change is the constant in our lives, meaning serves as the way to deal with it constructively by creating order.
- 2. Creates identity.** Meaning is critical to establishing our identities as both individuals and groups. An important element in creating secure identities for our selves is the fulfillment of our innate drive to make a difference. The secure and stable identity in turn gives us the confidence and courage to make choices, to be proactive rather than reactive. Through the creation of meaning we also honor our uniqueness, initiating an upward spiral of possibilities that compel us to move forward. Without a strong sense of who we are, there can be no free will. Without free will, there will be no leadership.
- 3. Builds connections.** Meaning connects us to the outer world -- satisfying our higher-level needs to serve and to be a part of something larger than ourselves. Meaning does more than satisfy the need for relationships with others. It elevates the status of relationships as being the conduit for “meaning making.”

Being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. – Victor Frankl

Truth #5

It's the relationship . . . stupid.

My message to leaders is actually quite simple: It's the relationship...stupid! A little blunt? Maybe. Accurate? Absolutely. We underestimate by some huge margin the importance of relationships in our efforts to create meaning in our organizational lives.

For a half-decade I have been involved in research on relationships between leaders and employees. The results have been both eye-opening and fascinating. My five-year journey can be reduced to five basic findings about leader-employee **relationships** that we better pay attention to:

- ❑ Some form fast - **but most don't**.
- ❑ Employees **overemphasize** their importance.
- ❑ Leaders **underestimate** their significance.
- ❑ They have a **big impact** on performance.
- ❑ They are becoming **increasingly critical** to our effectiveness.

Here's the bottom line for our organizations. Human capital is useless without relationships - particularly in our fast-paced, global economy. In fact, leaders can be best measured by their ability to create "social capital" -the sum total of all their relationships. It is through this network of relationships that their work is conducted. The undeniable truth is that where there are high levels of trust and mutual understanding between people, you will see enhanced performance.

Let's review the 5 findings in more detail:

Some relationship form fast - most don't. Some relationships form almost automatically but for the most part, relationship building activities are not easy to do (due to differences in style, values, etc.). A

root issue is that we fail to fully understand the art of "relating" that is core to relationship building. That's a mistake. The essence of relating begins with the heightened awareness of others and is fueled by trust-building interactions - such balancing our dialogue with respectful inquiry. As leaders, we need to be relentless relationship builders and be 100 times more deliberate about the "relating" to people.

Employees overemphasize the importance of relationships. It's a key source of meaning in their lives. Traditionally, the balance of power rests with the boss. It often goes way beyond the obvious power differences - where the leader controls resources, information, and access to meaningful work. Employees look to the leader for validation of their personal worth to the organization. And that can't come from an e-mail. It takes face time and a stable relationship for that to occur. Studies consistently point to the lost productivity attributes to "worrying about the relationship".

Leaders underestimate the significance of relationships. It is clear that a great deal of interaction is required to explain, reassure, and facilitate actual elements of an employee's performance. While facilitative-type behaviors are often prescribed as effective strategies for leaders in motivating their employees, the reality is that the broad challenges of the leader's role and the lack of skill and insight into relationship building serve as formidable barriers. In the heat of the battle, "relating" and the creation of meaning gets lost to the perceived needs to command, control, and communicate.

Relationships facilitate the creation of meaning - which impacts performance. In today's work environment, organizations are looking more and more for the extra effort and innovation that come from committed employees. The quality of the leader-employee relationship plays a unique and critical role in gaining this commitment. In a study I completed a few years ago, the quality of the leader-employee relationship played a larger role in the employee's performance than the leader's ability to employ traditional motivational strategies (e.g., goal alignment, training support, barrier reduction, effective use of reward, etc.). In other words, if the employee feels good about the relationship, they will be more confident in fully

investing themselves in the work (e.g., taking reasonable risks, making recommendations, etc.).

Relationships are becoming increasingly critical to our need to create meaning. The world is becoming "de-jobbed" at an accelerating rate due to the increasing role of information technology and the global pressures requiring speed, flexibility, and customization of responses to customer needs. Extra-effort performance responds to these demands by expanding the performance parameters and the role boundaries of the employee. This view offers support to the notion that the relationship between the leader-employee provides a stabilizing effect to the inherent inconsistency of the job of leading in an environment of constant change.

Simply stated, as leaders we need a better understanding of the dynamics of relationship formation and the determination and patience to put them into play.

Truth #6

Leaders do things *on purpose*.

A few years ago, I went to the new-year school orientation for my son, Zack, who was in 6th grade at the time. Zack was in a private, college-prep school that prided itself on its academic excellence. At the informal session, the Headmaster, posed a question of “purpose” to the parents. He asked them to choose between the following hypothetical choices:

Choice A: The school would continue to be an outstanding college prep school focusing on helping each student get into the top college of their choice. Priority would be given to preparation that would assist in the admissions process (e.g., grades, curriculum, testing, etc.).

Choice B: The school would focus more on developing the whole individual to more fully prepare them for the challenges of life. Issues such as values clarification and ethics would get more time and attention. The possible result, however, would be that the kids might not be as competitive in the college application process.

The reason for offering the choice was simple – the Headmaster was seeking clarity on a true dilemma. Getting into a great college became an end or purpose in itself that was distorting the larger mission of the school (preparing young people to lead themselves and others in an increasingly challenging world). Choice A was actually leading to burnout, frustration, and obsessive behavior (one kid took over 400 practice SAT tests) – with no higher meaning attained. Unfortunately, the parents sidestepped this challenging question posed to them – a missed opportunity of the highest order.

There are no easy answers in a world that is increasingly characterized by new levels of complexity and the presence of real dilemmas such as

the choice above. I believe the true starting point in solving these dilemmas is defining our purpose. Purpose is not situational or conditional. An organization's purpose should reflect the unchanging and shared principles that guide the organization's strategies and the behaviors of its participants. Are we a *college entrance school* or a *life preparatory school* that will we serve the core needs of our students and the world they will inherit?

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters
of life's longing for itself.
They come through you, not from you.
And though they are with you,
they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit,
not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them,
but strive not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward
nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent
forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and he bends you with his might that the arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand
be for gladness;
For even as he loves the arrow that flies,
so he loves the bow that is stable.

Kahlil Gibran

Truth #7

True leaders are *all in*.

The most dramatic move in poker is the "all in" move where all of your chips are thrown into the pot. Even the most disciplined poker face will show signs of tension when the "all in" move is exercised.

It's do or die time. You are betting that your hand is superior (or that everyone else that is still "in the game" will go with your bluff) – and you put everything at risk.

Very few of our activities ever reach this level of commitment – especially in our organizational lives where the game is much more about positioning, politics, and being opportunistic. The "finesse" game gets rewarded most – with savvy players carefully picking their wins and avoiding potential "black eyes."

I am curious to know the things in your work life where you personally are "all in." What projects, processes, or new strategic initiatives have the benefit of not just your full attention – but are being driven by your whole leadership presence. By "all in" – I mean fully committed to championing the meaningful change that is needed for our organization to truly thrive.

When we are "all in" – we gain the special powers that come from making a commitment. We are released from the anxiety of waiting and making small incremental gestures – and rewarded with a feeling of confidence for stepping forward. We also gain access to the additional resources that come our way as others will always gravitate to action, meaning, and leadership.

The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help that would never otherwise have occurred. A stream of events issues from the

decision, raising unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way. – W.H. Murray

Where are you “all in”? It’s a great question. It’s not just about what we bring to a problem – because we do bring a lot of sincere effort. It’s more about what we **withhold**. We often withhold the best part of ourselves – the **passion** that comes from personally committing to something that is truly worthy of our commitment – worthy of being **all in**.

Truth #8

True leaders know their *limits* best.

First of all, what do we mean by *limits*? Consider Steve, the tennis player:

- His *strength* is his forehand. He leverages it to engineer points.
- His *weakness* is his backhand. He protects it from his opponents.
- He is *limited* by his ability to play under the pressure of a close or important match.
- *Limits* are performance ceilings that neutralize our strengths and make our weaknesses more vulnerable.

Now, consider the story of Kate. Kate is a highly successful senior executive, deeply engaged in the minute-to-minute urgencies of her job. She loves the rush and challenge of her work and has a loyal following of supporters. Kate has also found it almost impossible to become emotionally accessible during a “new season” of her marriage – contributing to the rapid decline of a long-term relationship.

The situation finally worsens to the point where it not only creates great anxiety for Kate – she is now feeling significant dissatisfaction with her own responses to the situation. Slowly but surely she begins to “see herself” from a detached perspective and starts to confront her *limitations*.

She knows she lacks the patience, empathy and relational skills that are necessary for a close relationship to grow and prosper over the long-term. Deep down, she has always acknowledged these weaknesses – but the overarching demands of work and raising a family have always held the inevitable “truth telling” at bay (while allowing her to feel fully competent in her work and totally responsible in meeting her parental obligations). Kate also concedes that the previous and short-lived attempts at marriage counseling were merely efforts to shift the burden of having to fully respond to her *limits*.

The deep dissatisfaction and the honest internal dialogue have now opened Kate up to engaging with her husband differently. It is not easy at first – ***it is extremely difficult*** – but the openness and candor in their conversations creates a sense of hope. Kate commits to being more fully present and attentive to the real needs of the marriage. She purposely leans on her strengths and strong drive to achieve. It helps her to gain the energy and insight needed to reframe her marriage as “another big challenge” – a challenge that she would routinely knock down in her work world.

Over time, a new set of behaviors begins to take hold – extending the boundary of her “relating” ***limits*** within her marriage. For Kate, she ***does not believe*** that she has transformed her natural strengths and weaknesses. Rather, she feels that a new resolve and commitment has emerged that reflects a ***new values orientation*** toward maintaining her most important relationships. Kate is also careful to not claim a premature victory – knowing how easy it will be to revert to “work” mode – unraveling the temporary gains.

The amazing thing is that Kate is also seeing how these positive personal gains relate to her work world. It came as no surprise to her that her work relationships, although positive, lacked depth and meaning. Her ***limits*** were not just related to her marriage – they were a ***limiting theme*** in Kate’s life. With time she is beginning to cultivate a more open, relational presence in her work life – amplifying her leadership presence in ways that she could not have predicted.

Not only do leaders ***know their limits best***, they have the grit, pluck, and stamina to confront them head-on and re-negotiate ***a new performance ceiling***. Leaders leverage their strengths, manage their weaknesses, and ***lean into their limits*** – experiencing both the sweet vulnerability and deep satisfaction of what it means to be fully human.

The thing I am most aware of is my limits. And this is natural; for I never, or almost never, occupy the middle of my cage; my whole being surges toward the bars. Gide

Truth #9

True leaders know how to deal with their most formidable barrier – themselves!

As leaders, the first thing we must do is deal with the *self*. The *self* emerges as a separate entity and makes its own claims on the mind. Until it is integrated into the whole person, it will ask for and receive too much attention. More than anything, the *self* needs a sense of purpose that aligns it with its communities – with the dominant community for most of us being our work.

Until we make this peace – there is an incredible tension. There can be no true leadership until this alignment is accomplished. It's a difficult transition to make because our individual identities feel that too many personal concessions and compromises are being made in service to others. Many struggle through this contradiction throughout their lives, never fully resolving the tension between *servicing the self* and *service to others*.

It is particularly challenging for those of us who are Americans. We tend to see ourselves as rugged individualists – proud of our pioneering heritage. As individuals, we aspire to be independent – believing that through hard work we will achieve success. And many believe that by pursuing our own self-interests, the greater good for society will be achieved.

We also admire strength, and fear weakness. Deep in our collective psyche is the feeling that there is no place at the table for those who cannot carry their weight or add value. The undeniable truth about our culture is the belief that success or failure is the individual's responsibility. There is no confusion or stuttering around this value. Especially in our work world.

On the positive, “light” side of the equation, this American brand of individualism helps us to develop a strong sense of our “personal”

selves. It is this *sense of self* that builds our self-esteem and gives us the confidence to interact with the external world. It is also the most conscious part of who we are. In psychological terms, it is our ego.

In many cultures, the ego is repressed – the uniqueness and power in the individual are de-emphasized through constant socialization. In these cultures, the villain is the young son who can only think of his own dreams and leaves the family farm to attend college (shunning the collective needs of his community). In our American culture, however, the opposite is true. The bad guy is the father who expects his son to stay on the farm as opposed to “being all that he can be.”

Dr. Spock (whose advice on how to raise kids was influential for at least two generations of parents) at the end of his life conceded that his preoccupation with training children to be unfettered individualists was not such a good idea. The *self* became too dominant – often leading to disengagement and isolation. The evidence is clear and compelling that an equal focus on issues *beyond the self* are necessary to live a productive life. There has always been a dark side to our individualistic culture – especially when individual effort alone is increasingly insufficient to meet the demands of our work lives.

By nature we are *self*-centered, but we have a tremendous capacity for *selflessness*. The source of most interpersonal conflict is the unbalanced concern for the self, and an inability to address the needs of others. Psychologists have long noted the paradox that we can serve our own interests best by helping others achieve theirs.

To do this requires that some of our goals are virtuous or “in service to others.” It is the goals that we pursue that will shape and determine the kind of *self* that we are to become. It is through deliberate goal setting that we develop a *balanced self*. Over time, the act of goal setting transforms our individual identity – a necessary step in the process toward new actions, emotions, and choices.

Each day we face a critical choice, escaping into the “individualistic” world of the *self* – or engaging more fully in the world of *service to others*.

The first and best victory is to conquer self. – Plato

Truth #10

True leadership comes from the person – not the position.

The most fundamental truth about leading is that true leadership comes from the person – not the position.

The reality is that those who lead primarily through position enable the large leadership void in our organizations and institutions. The differences between positional and personal leadership are significant:

Positional leadership is characterized by control and the exercise of power.

Personal leadership is characterized by character and the exercise of influence.

However, cultivating a personal leadership presence is not an easy path. Deep in our collective psyche are the traditional leadership images of authority, position, and status. There's a special satisfaction that comes from being in charge.

Our first challenge then is to overcome our own personal needs for positional power. Until we deal with the inner self – we won't gain access to the higher potential that exists beyond our smaller, private world (where we routinely sell our souls for a "positional prize" in our life-dominate work cultures).

Secondly, we need to resist the strong cultural pressures that deny our personal experience and values in order to conform to group norms and the power of precedence (this is the way we have always done it).

The most powerful path that allows us to neutralize and move beyond these limiting forces is the process of **creating meaningful change**. Change is inevitable. Meaningful change is not. When we are in the pursuit of meaning – ***everything changes***. Consider these powerful

insights from John Gardner.

Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life.

You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of our own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something.

The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account.

Meaning represents a powerful new way of perceiving and acting in the world – allowing us to create a more open and abundant internal world that is fully prepared to create meaningful change in the external world.

Through the creation of meaning we also learn to positively facilitate the “battle wounds inflicted by others” in our pursuit of change. We learn to defuse the inevitable negative feelings that arise by cultivating a critical reflection and decision space that disables our automatic and ego-centered reactions. We learn to discern the most effective way to proceed – *with* and *for* others.

Finally, personal leadership development facilitates the “distributed leadership” approach that is most needed by our organizations and institutions today. The “positional” approach not only fails in responding to the core demands of leading – it robs the organization of the broader accountability, participation, and commitment that comes when leadership is developed throughout the organization.

Here's one simple practice that can be profoundly impactful. It involves the other side of your business card – *the blank side*. Instead of presenting others with the “printed” side of the card (which reinforces your *positional* status) – present them with something *personal* on the blank side.

Here are just a few ideas. In your own imperfect writing, share your “unofficial” title that reflects the true you (*vision-ator, cruise director, on-it-like-a-sonnet, whatever-it-takes guy*). Another idea is to share a short, inspiring quote that is meaningful to you. Or, write a quick note that reflects your encounter (*can't wait for what's next!*).

Whatever it is, lead with the personal, meaningful side. Underscore that it is not the position that gives you power or influence. For you, meaning matters most.