



Book

True North

Discover Your Authentic Leadership

Bill George and Peter Sims

Wiley, 2007

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Is your moral compass properly aligned? You can't be an authentic leader if it isn't, according to 125 leaders who are.

Recommendation

Considering the intangible nature of leadership, those who read about it want to know that those who write about it are properly experienced and credentialed. Bill George certainly qualifies. He is a management professor at the Harvard Business School, a member of several corporate boards, and the former chairman and CEO of Medtronic, the medical technology stalwart. George, and writer Peter Sims, the founder of an investment company, interviewed 125 leaders to discover what authentic, ethical leadership is all about, what its essence is and what it requires. This book represents the fruits of their enlightened, comprehensive research efforts. *getAbstract* recommends it to anyone who leads others. George and Sims see leadership as a quest, not a destination. This book is an excellent starting point for your journey.

In this summary, you will learn

- Why the business community has experienced a severe crisis of leadership
- Why ethical leadership based on sound values is so crucial
- Why "True North," your "internal compass," must become the touchstone of your personal leadership path

Take-Aways

- Interviews with 125 prominent leaders reveal the importance of values and character.
- Authentic leadership depends on your "internal compass." This is your "True North." It guides you toward who and what you are.
- Successful companies empower leaders widely throughout their organizations and at every level of management.
- The true leader inspires others to strive for success to achieve a shared purpose.
- You cannot become a great leader if you cannot lead yourself.
- True north inevitably directs you to your clear purpose in life – what you can contribute and how others will remember you.
- Great leaders do not operate in a vacuum. No leader ever achieved success alone.

- You will make your greatest contributions when you are enthusiastic about your work.
- Your true north is based on your values and deepest convictions.
- There are no "born" leaders or "instant" leaders. Leadership is not a state of being. It is a journey.

Summary

“As the world becomes ever more dangerous and our problems more complex and dire, we long for truly distinguished leaders, men and women who deserve our respect and loyalty.”

“Ethically grounded leadership is not only possible, it is often the most effective leadership of all.”

“When you follow your internal compass, your leadership will be authentic, and people will naturally want to associate with you.”

"Testing Values under Pressure"

Jon Huntsman is the founder and chair of the Huntsman Corporation, a \$13 billion firm in the chemical industry. In 1972, he went to work for the Nixon administration, eventually joining the staff of Bob Haldeman, President Richard Nixon's powerful chief of staff and right-hand man. Haldeman soon asked Huntsman to help him entrap a congressman from California who had opposed a Nixon initiative. Huntsman refused and shortly thereafter left the administration.

In 2001, due to a chemical industry recession, Huntsman's company was in big trouble. Eighty-seven lenders met with him to deliver a somber message: he had to put his firm into Chapter 11 bankruptcy. If he refused, they warned, they would no longer ship it the supplies it needed to operate. Of course, this would have been its death knell. But his good name and the good name of his firm meant too much to him to let it slip into bankruptcy. It took three tough years, but he turned it around. "I repaid every single debt," he proudly proclaims.

Huntsman has been tested at almost every stage of his life. Shortly after he graduated from college, his mother died from breast cancer. Cancer also killed his father and stepmother. Huntsman contracted cancer twice, but beat it both times. Huntsman's life story is an inspiring tale, but how does it relate to the concept of "True North"?

"True North"

At every single crossroads, Huntsman used his internal moral compass – that is, his own true north – to guide the direction he should take as a leader and a man. Like the compass point, true north is your inner direction. It is who you are down deep. It represents your most sacred values – the vital markers you use to navigate through life. Huntsman exemplifies the most basic true north precept: "Leadership principles are values translated into action." Always maintaining true north, hewing to your values, is the mark of the authentic leader. Doing otherwise is unthinkable.

In contrast, an inauthentic leader lacks values and a strong moral sense, but nevertheless has been assigned to manage or lead others. In reality, such a person is not a leader at all. Instead, he or she is an empty shell, an authoritarian (and usually sad) figure who, often, leads only by using fear and rank. People may do as inauthentic leaders instruct, but sullenly and with little or no respect.

A Crisis of Leadership

The business world has been rocked to its foundations by numerous high-profile scandals. Who has been responsible? The answer is clear: narcissistic, power-mad CEOs and other senior executives who prioritize their personal, financial and egotistical interests. And, while they were up to their slimy shenanigans, too many board members placidly looked on and did nothing. Pleased with their lucrative directorships, many board members have been unwilling to rock the boat. The world of politics also seems to be disgraced routinely by those who abuse the public trust. On a daily basis, florid headlines tell stories of politicians who have been forced to resign, or convicted and jailed because of their own severe ethical

lapses. The fact is that contemporary society has been burdened with far too many inauthentic leaders. These individuals apparently do not possess internal moral compasses – that is, true north guidance – to point them to the proper, ethical paths.

“Character without capacity usually means weakness in a leader, but capacity without character means danger.” (David Gergen)

Like Jon Huntsman, authentic leaders always draw upon their personal ethics, morality and basic sense of right and wrong as they lead others. Indeed, they find that their strong ethical base represents the sine qua non of leadership. Of course, authentic leaders must also be smart and capable. But even more, they need special inner qualities: high principles, ideals, values and morals. How else can they inspire others? After all, that is what leadership is all about.

This is certainly true at Starbucks. Founder Howard Schultz is proud that Starbucks is now the first U.S. company to make health-care coverage available for part-time employees who work 20 hours or less. Schultz calls this a "transforming event" for his firm.

Individual Life Stories Often Define Leadership

Many authentic leaders, such as Huntsman and Schultz, find that their leadership approach emerges from challenging experiences, which help them understand who they are and which principles define them. As they manage difficult events, these leaders "unleash their passions" and "discover the purpose of their leadership." Five dimensions mark the authentic leader:

“Boards of directors frequently choose leaders for their charisma instead of their character, their style rather than their substance and their image instead of their integrity.”

1. "Purpose with passion" – True leaders always bring passion to their roles. Conversely, employing passion without purpose often results in narcissism and egotism. Passion defines the life and work of Ellen Breyer, CEO at Hazelden Foundation, which helps people overcome chemical dependencies. At the end of the 1960s, Breyer was a passionate demonstrator against the Vietnam War and in support of civil rights. She now leads Hazelden with the same passion that impelled her activism decades ago.
2. "Practicing solid values" – A person who attempts to lead without values is no leader. He or she is merely a person with authority. Supposed "leaders" who espouse high values, but fail to honor them, invariably lose the confidence of their subordinates.
3. "Leading with heart" – Heartless leaders inspires no one. They often depend on instilling fear in others to get them to follow. Otherwise, no one would comply.
4. "Establishing connected relationships" – Leaders must be able to develop truly meaningful personal relationships with their subordinates. Dick Kovacevich, the chairman and CEO of San Francisco's Wells Fargo Bank, believes in and trusts the members of his executive team. His background as captain of his school's baseball team and as quarterback of its football team taught him to give his players the latitude they need to win. "On the athletic field, I learned that a group of people can perform so much better as a team than as the sum of their individual talents," he explains. "If you were quarterback for a team of quarterbacks, you would lose every game."
5. "Demonstrating self-discipline" – Authentic leaders set high standards for themselves and their employees. They use all of their internal resources, and the full resources of their organizations, to achieve important goals. Consider Nelson Mandela, the inspirational leader of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement. Mandela spent 27 years in jail, but never lost heart. He maintained a positive attitude and disciplined spirit. Released at 71, Mandela resumed his civil rights work. Four years later he became president of a reformed South Africa.

“Leaders are highly complex human beings, people who have distinctive qualities that cannot be sufficiently described by lists or traits of characteristics.”

“If you want to be a leader, you've got to flip that switch and

"Knowing Your Authentic Self"

understand that it's about serving the folks on your team."

"Know thyself" is a required mantra for an authentic leader. Build your self-awareness by regularly testing yourself, and your key values and beliefs, in the cauldron of "real-world experiences." This is often difficult and painful, but life ultimately is about making tough choices. For the authentic leader that means the right choices. You cannot be an authentic leader if you are unwilling to stick to your individual principles.

"Practicing Your Values and Principles"

The concept of adhering to your core beliefs is crucial. First, define these internal qualities:

"Each of us possesses a moral GPS, a compass or conscience programmed by parents, teachers, coaches, grandparents, clergy, friends and peers."

- "Values" – This concerns what is most important in your life, what you hold dear. For Reatha Clark King, president of the General Mills Foundation, this means giving people increased opportunities to improve themselves and their lives. This goal has particular relevance to King, who earned \$3 daily as a child laborer in the cotton fields of Georgia.
- "Leadership principles" – These are the standards you rely upon to lead others. They directly relate to your values.
- "Ethical boundaries" – These are the limits you place on your actions, based on your personal moral standards.

"What Motivates You to Be a Leader?"

Leadership can be a difficult path. You must be fully motivated before embarking on this journey. If all you want is money and power, you'll be in trouble. Set your sights higher. Plan to make a "difference in the world."

"No one can be authentic by trying to be like someone else."

This is something Dan Vasella, chairman and CEO of the giant drug company Novartis, has been able to accomplish. Vasella suffered from numerous serious illnesses as a child. His older sister died from cancer at the age of 18. A few years later, his father died during surgery. Vasella became a physician to fight illness, and then went to work as an executive in the pharmaceuticals industry.

He quickly moved up the corporate ladder, eventually becoming Novartis' CEO. Through Vasella's enlightened leadership, Novartis now develops life-saving drugs that people all over the world rely upon daily to maintain their health and the quality of their lives.

"Building Your Support Team"

No leader ever achieved a set of planned objectives alone. You need a "support team" that will provide you with objective feedback and emotional support, and will help you keep moving ahead. Your support team may consist of colleagues, friends, family or mentors.

"Authentic leaders lead with their hearts as well as their heads."

"Staying Grounded: Integrating Your Life"

Leading always involves a high degree of stress. This internal pressure will put you in an early grave unless you learn how to cope with it. Stay grounded and fully integrate all aspects of your life – personal, professional, religious and so on. Most important: Always "find time for yourself." Failing to do so will certainly produce burnout.

"Are You Ready for the Challenge of Leadership?"

Are you in touch with your most cherished values and beliefs? Is your true north properly aligned and working? If so, you are ready to step up and lead. Is this an awesome undertaking? Not really. Indeed, leading others, at the most basic level, is a fairly straightforward process. Just get in front and do it! In short, anyone can lead – any time.

"Leadership is a journey, not a destination. It is a

The concept of the born leader is a myth. Any individual can be a leader. It simply takes courage, vision and – most important – a strong ethical base.

marathon not a sprint. It is a process not an outcome."

Take a look at what Oprah Winfrey has been able to accomplish in her life. Born into poverty in Mississippi, Winfrey decided as a small child that she would advance in life. Her journey was anything but easy. It included being raped by a cousin and sexually molested by family members. But despite these and other setbacks, Winfrey was determined to succeed, and did. Winfrey is now one of the media's brightest, most successful stars. She dedicates her life in part to empowering others, particularly younger women.

Remember that there is no time like the present. Look around you. Things need changing – and deep down, you know how to change them. So do so. Become the leader you always were meant to be. Don't "wait for a tap on the shoulder." Time is fleeting.

"It is never too late...or too soon to step up to leadership."

No matter whether you are a low-level or middle manager, you can become a vital leader within your organization. Everyone has to start somewhere, and every journey begins with the first step.

If you want to become a leader, then lead. Just as there never is a perfect time to become a leader, there never is a bad time either. Wendy Kopp proved this at age 21. After graduating from Princeton, she founded Teach for America to upgrade the K-12 educational system in the U.S. The program has developed 10,000 teachers, and six of every 10 of them is still in education.

"Embrace Your True North"

Are you ready to become an authentic leader? Then fully embrace your true north. You cannot succeed as a leader without taking that step. True north establishes your authenticity and inspires others to follow your lead. Remember: Leadership is a never-ending quest. It means taking one step, and then another, and another, moving inexorably ahead to achieve your important goals. So, are you headed in the right direction? You are if your true north is guiding you. It is your essential touchstone for leadership success.

"Eighty percent of success is showing up."

About the Authors

Bill George is a professor at the Harvard School of Business. He has extensive executive experience, including serving as a CEO and as a board member for numerous corporations. Co-author **Peter Sims**, a Stanford M.B.A., co-founded an investment firm.

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