

When the economy recovers, things won't return to normal—and a different mode of leadership will be required.

Leadership in a (Permanent) Crisis

by Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow,
and Marty Linsky

It would be profoundly reassuring to view the current economic crisis as simply another rough spell that we need to get through. Unfortunately, though, today's mix of urgency, high stakes, and uncertainty will continue as the norm even after the recession ends. Economies cannot erect a firewall against intensifying global competition, energy constraints, climate change, and political instability. The immediate crisis—which we will get through, with the help of policy makers' expert technical adjustments—merely sets the stage for a sustained or even permanent crisis of serious and unfamiliar challenges.

Consider the heart attack that strikes in the middle of the night. EMTs rush the victim to the hospital, where expert trauma and surgical teams—executing established procedures because there is little time for creative improvisation—stabilize the patient and then provide new vessels for the heart. The emergency has passed, but a high-stakes, if somewhat less urgent, set of challenges remains. Having recovered from the surgery, how does the patient pre-

vent another attack? Having survived, how does he adapt to the uncertainties of a new reality in order to thrive? The crisis is far from over.

The task of leading during a sustained crisis—whether you are the CEO of a major corporation or a manager heading up an impromptu company initiative—is treacherous. Crisis leadership has two distinct phases. First is that emergency phase, when your task is to stabilize the situation and buy time. Second is the adaptive phase, when you tackle the underlying causes of the crisis and build the capacity to thrive in a new reality. The adaptive phase is especially tricky: People put enormous pressure on you to respond to their anxieties with authoritative certainty, even if doing so means overselling what you know and discounting what you don't. As you ask them to make necessary but uncomfortable adaptive changes in their behavior or work, they may try to bring you down. People clamor for direction, while you are faced with a way forward that isn't at all obvious. Twists and turns are the only certainty.

Yet you still have to lead.

Hunker Down—or Press “Reset”

The danger in the current economic situation is that people in positions of authority will hunker down. They will try to solve the problem with short-term fixes: tightened controls, across-the-board cuts, restructuring plans. They'll default to what they know how to do in order to reduce frustration and quell their own and others' fears. Their primary mode will be drawing on familiar expertise to help their organizations weather the storm.

That is understandable. It's natural for authority figures to try to protect their people from external threats so that everyone can quickly return to business as usual. But in these times, even the most competent authority will be unable to offer this protection. The organizational adaptability required to meet a relentless succession of challenges is beyond anyone's current expertise. No one in a position of authority—none of us, in fact—has been here before. (The expertise we relied on in the past got us to this point, after all.) An organization that depends solely on its senior managers to deal with the challenges risks failure.

That risk increases if we draw the wrong conclusions from our likely recovery from the current economic downturn. Many people survive heart attacks, but most cardiac surgery patients soon resume their old ways: Only about 20% give up smoking, change their diet, or get more exercise. In fact, by reducing the sense of urgency, the very success of the initial treatment creates the illusion of a return to normalcy. The medical experts' technical prowess, which solves the immediate problem of survival, inadvertently lets patients off the hook for changing their lives to thrive in the long term. High stakes and uncertainty remain, but the diminished sense of urgency keeps most patients from focusing on the need for adaptation.

People who practice what we call *adaptive leadership* do not make this mistake. Instead of hunkering down, they seize the opportunity of moments like the current one to hit the organization's reset button. They use the turbulence of the present to build on and bring closure to the past. In the process, they change key rules of the game, reshape parts of the organization, and redefine the work people do.

We are not talking here about shaking up an organization so that nothing makes sense anymore. The process of adaptation is at least as much a process of conservation as it is of rein-

vention. Targeted modifications in specific strands of the organizational DNA will make the critical difference. (Consider that human beings share more than 90% of their DNA with chimpanzees.)

Still, people will experience loss. Some parts of the organization will have to die, and some jobs and familiar ways of working will be eliminated. As people try to develop new competencies, they'll often feel ashamed of their incompetence. Many will need to renegotiate loyalties with the mentors and colleagues whose teachings no longer apply.

Your empathy will be as essential for success as the strategic decisions you make about what elements of the organizational DNA to discard. That is because you will need people's help—not their blind loyalty as they follow you on a path to the future but their enthusiastic help in discovering that path. And if they are to assist you, you must equip them with the ability to perform in an environment of continuing uncertainty and uncontrollable change.

Today's Leadership Tasks

In this context, leadership is an improvisational and experimental art. The skills that enabled most executives to reach their positions of command—analytical problem solving, crisp decision making, the articulation of clear direction—can get in the way of success. Although these skills will at times still be appropriate, the adaptive phase of a crisis requires some new leadership practices.

Foster adaptation. Executives today face two competing demands. They must execute in order to meet today's challenges. And they must adapt what and how things get done in order to thrive in tomorrow's world. They must develop “next practices” while excelling at today's best practices.

Julie Gilbert is evidence that these dual tasks can—indeed, should—be practiced by people who do not happen to be at the very top of an organization. As a vice president and then senior VP at retailer Best Buy from 2000 to early 2009, she saw a looming crisis in the company's failure to profit from the greater involvement of women in the male-oriented world of consumer electronics. Women were becoming more influential in purchasing decisions, directly and indirectly. But capitalizing on this trend would require something beyond

Ronald Heifetz (heifetz@cambridge-leadership.com), Alexander Grashow (agrashow@cambridge-leadership.com), and Marty Linsky (marty@cambridge-leadership.com) are partners of Cambridge Leadership Associates and the coauthors of *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Harvard Business Press, 2009). Heifetz, the founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and Linsky, a member of the Kennedy School faculty, are the coauthors of “A Survival Guide for Leaders” (HBR June 2002).

a smart marketing plan. It would demand a change in the company's orientation.

Getting an organization to adapt to changes in the environment is not easy. You need to *confront loyalty to legacy practices* and understand that your desire to change them makes you a target of attack. Gilbert believed that instead of simply selling technology products to mostly male customers, Best Buy needed to appeal to women by reflecting the increasing integration of consumer electronics into family life. So Gilbert headed up an initiative to establish in-store boutiques that sold home theater systems along with coordinated furniture and accessories. Stores set up living-room displays to showcase not just the electronics but also the entertainment environment. Salespeople were trained to interact with the previously ignored female customers who came in with men to look at systems.

Gilbert says that championing this approach subjected her to some nasty criticism from managers who viewed Best Buy as a retailer of technology *products*, not experiences. But focusing on the female purchaser when a man and a woman walked into the store—making eye contact and greeting her, asking about her favorite movies and demonstrating them on the systems—often resulted in the couple's purchasing a higher-end product than they had originally considered. According to Gilbert, returns and exchanges of purchases made by couples were 60% lower than those made by men. With the rethinking of traditional practices, Best Buy's home theater business flourished, growing from two pilot in-store boutiques in mid-2004 to more than 350 five years later.

As you consider eliminating practices that seem ill suited to a changing environment, you must *distinguish the essential from the expendable*. What is so precious and central to an organization's identity and capacity that it must be preserved? What, even if valued by many, must be left behind in order to move forward?

Gilbert wanted to preserve Best Buy's strong culture of responding to customers' needs. But the company's almost exclusively male culture—"guys selling to guys"—seemed to her a barrier to success. For example, the phrase "the jets are up" meant that the top male executives were aboard corporate aircraft on a tour of Best Buy stores. The flights gave them a chance to huddle on important issues and

bond with one another. Big decisions were often announced following one of these trips. After getting a call with a question about female customers from one such group visiting a Best Buy home theater boutique, Gilbert persuaded senior executives never to let the jets go up without at least one woman on board.

Because you don't know quite where you are headed as you build an organization's adaptability, it's prudent to avoid grand and detailed strategic plans. Instead, *run numerous experiments*. Many will fail, of course, and the way forward will be characterized by constant mid-course corrections. But that zigzagging path will be emblematic of your company's ability to discover better products and processes. Take a page out of the technology industry's playbook: Version 2.0 is an explicit acknowledgment that products coming to market are experiments, prototypes to be improved in the next iteration.

Best Buy's home theater business was one experiment. A much broader one at the company grew out of Gilbert's belief that in order to adapt to an increasingly female customer base, Best Buy would need to change the role of women within the organization. The company had traditionally looked to senior executives for direction and innovation. But, as Gilbert explained to us, a definition of consumer electronics retailing that included women would ultimately have to come from the bottom up. Appealing to female customers required empowering female employees at all levels of the company.

This led to the creation of "WoLF (Women's Leadership Forum) packs," in which women, from store cashiers to corporate executives, came together to support one another and to generate innovative projects by drawing on their collective experience. In an unorthodox attempt to neutralize the threat to Best Buy's traditionally male culture, two men paired up with two women to lead each group.

More than 30,000 employees joined WoLF packs. The company says the initiative strengthened its pipeline of high-potential leaders, led to a surge in the number of female job applicants, and improved the bottom line by reducing turnover among female employees. Gilbert, who recently left Best Buy to help other companies establish similar programs, was able to realize the dual goal of adaptive leadership: tackling the current challenge and

Adaptive Leadership in Practice

Best Buy | A senior vice president helped the company adapt to the reality that women increasingly make consumer electronics purchasing decisions.

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center | The new CEO helped a dysfunctional organization created through the hasty merger of two Harvard teaching hospitals adapt to modern health care challenges.

Egon Zehnder International | The founder fostered a leadership style that helped the executive search firm adapt to the rise of online recruiting and competitors' IPOs.

Keep your hand on the thermostat. If the heat's too low, people won't make difficult decisions. If it's too high, they might panic.

building adaptability. She had an immediate positive impact on the company's financial performance while positioning the organization to deploy more of its people to reach wider markets.

Embrace disequilibrium. Without urgency, difficult change becomes far less likely. But if people feel too much distress, they will fight, flee, or freeze. The art of leadership in today's world involves orchestrating the inevitable conflict, chaos, and confusion of change so that the disturbance is productive rather than destructive.

Health care is in some ways a microcosm of the turbulence and uncertainty facing the entire economy. Paul Levy, the CEO of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, in Boston, is trying to help his organization adapt to the industry's constant changes.

When Levy took over, in 2002, Beth Israel Deaconess was a dysfunctional organization in serious financial trouble. Created several years previously through the hasty merger of two Harvard Medical School teaching hospitals, it had struggled to integrate their very different cultures. Now it was bleeding red ink and faced the likelihood of being acquired by a for-profit company, relinquishing its status as a prestigious research institution. Levy quickly made changes that put the hospital on a stronger financial footing and eased the cultural tensions.

To rescue the medical center, Levy had to create discomfort. He forced people to confront the potentially disastrous consequences of maintaining the status quo—continued financial losses, massive layoffs, an outright sale—stating in a memo to all employees that “this is our last chance” to save the institution. He publicly challenged powerful medical factions within the hospital and made clear he'd no longer tolerate clashes between the two cultures.

But a successful turnaround was no guarantee of long-term success in an environment clouded by uncertainty. In fact, the stability that resulted from Levy's initial achievements threatened the hospital's ability to adapt to the succession of challenges that lay ahead.

Keeping an organization in a productive zone of disequilibrium is a delicate task; in the practice of leadership, you must *keep your hand on the thermostat*. If the heat is consistently too low, people won't feel the need to

ask uncomfortable questions or make difficult decisions. If it's consistently too high, the organization risks a meltdown: People are likely to panic and hunker down.

Levy kept the heat up after the financial emergency passed. In a move virtually unprecedented for a hospital, he released public quarterly reports on medical errors and set a goal of eliminating those errors within four years. Although the disclosures generated embarrassing publicity, Levy believed that acknowledging and learning from serious mistakes would lead to improved patient care, greater trust in the institution, and long-term viability.

Maintaining the right level of disequilibrium requires that you *depersonalize conflict*, which naturally arises as people experiment and shift course in an environment of uncertainty and turbulence. The aim is to focus the disagreement on issues, including some of your own perspectives, rather than on the interested parties. But the issues themselves are more than disembodied facts and analysis. People's competencies, loyalties, and direct stakes lie behind them. So you need to *act politically* as well as analytically. In a period of turmoil, you must look beyond the merits of an issue to understand the interests, fears, aspirations, and loyalties of the factions that have formed around it. Orchestrating conflicts and losses and negotiating among various interests are the name of the game.

That game requires you to *create a culture of courageous conversations*. In a period of sustained uncertainty, the most difficult topics must be discussed. Dissenters who can provide crucial insights need to be protected from the organizational pressure to remain silent. Executives need to listen to unfamiliar voices and set the tone for candor and risk taking.

Early in 2009, with Beth Israel Deaconess facing a projected \$20 million annual loss after several years of profitability, Paul Levy held an employee meeting to discuss layoffs. He expressed concern about how cutbacks would affect low-wage employees, such as housekeepers, and somewhat cautiously floated what seemed likely to be an unpopular idea: protecting some of those low-paying jobs by reducing the salary and benefits of higher-paid employees—including many sitting in the auditorium. To his surprise, the room erupted in applause.

His candid request for help led to countless suggestions for cost savings, including an offer

by the 13 medical department heads to save 10 jobs through personal donations totaling \$350,000. These efforts ultimately reduced the number of planned layoffs by 75%.

Generate leadership. Corporate adaptability usually comes not from some sweeping new initiative dreamed up at headquarters but from the accumulation of microadaptations originating throughout the company in response to its many microenvironments. Even the successful big play is typically a product of many experiments, one of which finally proves pathbreaking.

To foster such experiments, you have to acknowledge the interdependence of people throughout the organization, just as companies increasingly acknowledge the interdependence of players—suppliers, customers, even rivals—beyond their boundaries. It is an illusion to expect that an executive team on its own will find the best way into the future. So you must use leadership to generate more leadership deep in the organization.

At a worldwide partners' meeting in June 2000, Egon Zehnder, the founder of the executive search firm bearing his name, announced his retirement. Instead of reflecting on the 36-year-old firm's steady growth under his leadership, he issued a warning: Stability "is a liability, not an asset, in today's world," he said. "Each new view of the horizon is a glance through a different turn of the kaleidoscope" (a symbol of disequilibrium, if there ever was one). "The future of this firm," Zehnder continued, "is totally in the hands of the men and women here in this room."

From someone else, the statement might have come across as obligatory pap. But Egon Zehnder built his firm on the conviction that changes in internal and external environments require a new kind of leadership. He saw early on that his start-up could not realize its full potential if he made himself solely responsible for its success.

Individual executives just don't have the personal capacity to sense and make sense of all the change swirling around them. They need to *distribute leadership responsibility*, replacing hierarchy and formal authority with organizational bandwidth, which draws on collective intelligence. Executives need to relax their sense of obligation to be all and do all and instead become comfortable sharing their burden with people operating in diverse functions

and locations throughout the organization. By pushing responsibility for adaptive work down into the organization, you clear space for yourself to think, probe, and identify the next challenge on the horizon.

To distribute leadership responsibility more broadly, you need to *mobilize everyone to generate solutions* by increasing the information flow that allows people across the organization to make independent decisions and share the lessons they learn from innovative efforts.

To generate new leadership and innovative ideas, you need to *leverage diversity*—which, of course, is easier said than done. We all tend to spend time with people who are similar to us. Listening and learning across divides is taxing work. But if you do not engage the widest possible range of life experiences and views—including those of younger employees—you risk operating without a nuanced picture of the shifting realities facing the business internally and externally.

Creating this kind of environment involves giving up some authority usually associated with leadership and even some ownership, whether legal or psychological, in the organization. The aim, of course, is for everyone to "act like they own the place" and thus be motivated to come up with innovations or take the lead in creating value for their company from wherever they sit.

Zehnder did in fact convert the firm into a corporation in which every partner, including himself, held an equal share of equity and had an equal vote at partners' meetings. Everyone's compensation rose or fell with the firm's overall performance. The aim was to make all the partners "intertwined in substance and purpose."

Zehnder's collaborative and distributed leadership model informed a strategic review that the firm undertook just after his retirement. In the short term, the partners faced a dramatic collapse in the executive search market; their long-term challenge was a shifting competitive landscape, including the rise of online recruiting and the initial public offerings of several major competitors. As the firm tried to figure out how to adapt and thrive in this environment, Zehnder's words hung in the air: "How we deal with change differentiates the top performers from the laggards. But first we must know what should never change. We must grasp the difference between timeless principles and daily practices." Again, most sustain-

An executive team on its own can't find the best solutions. But leadership can generate more leadership deep in the organization.

able change is not about change at all but about discerning and conserving what is precious and essential.

The firm took a bottom-up approach to sketching out its future, involving every partner, from junior to senior, in the process. It chose to remain a private partnership. Unlike rivals that were ordering massive downsizing, the firm decided there would be virtually no layoffs: Preserving the social fabric of the organization, crucial to long-term success, was deemed more important than short-term financial results. In fact, the firm opted to continue hiring and electing partners even during the down market.

Rooted in its culture of interdependence, the firm adapted to a changing environment, producing excellent results, even in the short term, as it gained market share, maintained healthy margins, and sustained morale—a major source of ongoing success. Adaptive work enabled the firm to take the best of its history into the future.

Taking Care of Yourself

To keep yourself from being corralled by the forces that generated the crisis in the first place, you must be able to depart from the default habits of authoritative certainty. The work of leadership demands that you manage not only the critical adaptive responses within and surrounding your business but also your own thinking and emotions.

This will test your limits. Taking care of yourself both physically and emotionally will be crucial to your success. You can achieve none of your leadership aims if you sacrifice yourself to the cause.

First, give yourself permission to *be both optimistic and realistic*. This will create a healthy tension that keeps optimism from turning into denial and realism from devolving into cynicism.

Second, *find sanctuaries* where you can reflect on events and regain perspective. A sanctuary may be a place or an activity that allows you to step away and recalibrate your internal responses. For example, if you tend to demand too much from your organization, you might

use the time to ask yourself, “Am I pushing too hard? Am I at risk of grinding people into the ground, including myself? Do I fully appreciate the sacrifices I’m asking people to make?”

Third, *reach out to confidants* with whom you can debrief your workdays and articulate your reasons for taking certain actions. Ideally, a confidant is not a current ally within your organization—who may someday end up on the opposite side of an issue—but someone external to it. The most important criterion is that your confidant care more about you than about the issues at stake.

Fourth, *bring more of your emotional self* to the workplace. Appropriate displays of emotion can be an effective tool for change, especially when balanced with poise. Maintaining this balance lets people know that although the situation is fraught with feelings, it is containable. This is a tricky tightrope to walk, especially for women, who may worry about being dismissed as too emotional.

Finally, *don’t lose yourself in your role*. Defining your life through a single endeavor, no matter how important your work is to you and to others, makes you vulnerable when the environment shifts. It also denies you other opportunities for fulfillment.

Achieving your highest and most noble aspirations for your organization may take more than a lifetime. Your efforts may only begin this work. But you can accomplish something worthwhile every day in the interactions you have with the people at work, with your family, and with those you encounter by chance. Adaptive leadership is a daily opportunity to mobilize the resources of people to thrive in a changing and challenging world.

Note: Some of the information in this article was drawn from “Paul Levy: Taking Charge of the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center,” HBS case no. 9-303-008 and “Strategic Review at Egon Zehnder International,” HBS case no. 9-904-071.

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by
DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN

LINCOLN and the Art of Transformative LEADERSHIP

Do the times make the leader, or does the leader shape the times? How can a leader infuse people's lives with a sense of purpose and meaning?

These are among the questions that Doris Kearns Goodwin explores in her new book, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, which examines four singular styles of leadership: transformative, crisis management, turnaround, and visionary. She follows the course of leadership development in the careers of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson,

providing case histories that illustrate the skills and strengths that enabled these four men to lead the United States through periods of great upheaval.

The article that follows is excerpted from her case study of Lincoln's pivotal decision to issue and guide to fruition the Emancipation Proclamation—a purpose that required the support of the cabinet, the army, and, ultimately, the American people. Rarely, Goodwin notes, was a leader better suited to the challenge of the fractured historical moment. Struggle had been his birthright; resilience his keystone strength. Possessed of a powerful emotional intelligence, Lincoln was both merciful



and merciless, confident and humble, patient and persistent—able to mediate among factions and sustain the spirits of his countrymen. He displayed an extraordinary ability to absorb the conflicting wills of a divided people and reflect back to them an unbending faith in a unified future.

On July 22, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln convened a special session of his cabinet to reveal—not to debate—his preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation. At the outset, Navy Secretary Gideon Welles recalled, Lincoln declared that he fully appreciated that there were “differences in the Cabinet on the slavery question” and welcomed suggestions following the confidential reading. However, he “wished it to be understood that the question was settled in his own mind” and that “the responsibility of the measure was his.” The time for bold action had arrived.

What enabled Lincoln to determine that the time was right for this fundamental transformation in how the war was waged and what the Union was fighting for? And how did he persuade his fractious cabinet, a skeptical army, and his divided countrymen in the North to go along with him?

Certainly, the dire situation of the war and Lincoln’s long-held conviction that “the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy” were vital elements. He had always believed, he later said, that “if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.” But underlying all was the steadfast force of his emotional intelligence: his empathy, humility, consistency, self-awareness, self-discipline, and generosity of spirit. These qualities proved indispensable to uniting a divided nation and utterly transforming it, and they provide powerful lessons for leaders at every level.

Acknowledge when failed policies demand a change in direction. In the last week of June 1862, Union General George B. McClellan’s Army of the Potomac had suffered a crushing defeat in its first major offensive. In a series of brutal battles, General Robert E. Lee’s forces had repulsed McClellan’s advance up the Virginia Peninsula toward the Confederate capital at Richmond, driving the Union army into retreat, decimating its ranks, and leaving nearly 16,000 dead, captured, or wounded. At one point the capitulation of McClellan’s entire force had seemed possible. Northern morale was at its nadir—lower even than in the aftermath of Bull Run. “Things had gone from bad to worse,” Lincoln recalled of that summer, “until I felt that we had reached the end of our rope on the plan of operations we had been pursuing; that we had played our last card and must change our tactics.”

So the situation stood on July 22, when the president gathered the cabinet to read his proclamation. He enumerated the various congressional acts regarding confiscation of rebel property, repeated his recommendation for compensated emancipation, and reiterated his goal of preserving the Union. And then he read the single sentence that would change the course of history:

As a fit and necessary military measure for effecting this object [preservation of the Union], I, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, do order and declare that on the first day of January in the year of our Lord 1863, all persons held as slaves within any state or states, wherein the constitutional authority of the United States shall not then be practically recognized, submitted to, and maintained, shall then, thenceforward and forever, be free.

The scope of the proclamation was stunning. For the first time, the president yoked the Union and the abolition of slavery in a single transformative moral force. Some 3.5 million blacks in the South, where generations had lived enslaved, were promised freedom. Seventy-eight words in one sentence would supplant legislation on property rights and slavery that had governed policy in the House and the Senate for nearly three-quarters of a century. By postponing for six months the date the proclamation would take effect, however, Lincoln offered the rebellious states a last chance to end the war and return to the Union before permanently forfeiting their slaves.

Anticipate contending viewpoints. Though Lincoln had signaled before reading the proclamation that his mind was already made up, he welcomed reactions from his cabinet—his “team of rivals”—whether for or against. So clearly did he know each of the members, so thoroughly had he anticipated their responses, that he was prepared to answer whatever objections they might raise. He had deliberately built a team of men who represented the major geographical, political, and ideological factions of the Union. For months he had listened intently as they wrestled among themselves about how best to preserve this Union. At various junctures diverse members had assailed Lincoln as too radical, too conservative, brazenly dictatorial, or dangerously feckless. He had welcomed the wide range of opinions they provided as he turned the subject over in his mind, debating “first the one side and then the other of every question arising” until, through hard mental work, his own position had emerged. His process of decision making, born of a characteristic ability to entertain a full carousel of vantage points at a single time, seemed to some

Lincoln and his cabinet with the Emancipation Proclamation
Lithograph by Currier & Ives, 1876



laborious; but once he had finally determined to act, it was no longer a question of what—only when.

Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Attorney General Edward Bates—the most radical and the most conservative of Lincoln’s team—were the only two who expressed strong support for the proclamation. That Stanton recommended its “immediate promulgation” was understandable. More intimately aware than any of his colleagues of the condition of the hard-pressed army, he instantly grasped the massive military boost emancipation would confer: Slave labor kept farms and plantations in operation; the toil of slaves liberated Confederate soldiers to fight. As for the constitutionalist Bates,

he unexpectedly and wholeheartedly concurred—albeit with the condition that a deportation plan be put in place for all the emancipated Negroes.

Welles kept silent, later admitting that the proclamation’s “magnitude and its uncertain results,” its “solemnity and weight,” mightily oppressed him. Not only did he worry about “an extreme exercise of War powers,” but he feared that “desperation on the part of the slave-owners” would most likely lengthen the war and raise the struggle to new heights of ferocity. Interior Secretary Caleb Smith, a conservative Whig from Indiana, remained silent as well, though he later confided to his assistant secretary that should Lincoln actually issue the



proclamation, he would summarily “resign and go home and attack the Administration.”

Montgomery Blair, the postmaster general, forcefully opposed the proclamation. As a spokesman for the border states (he had practiced law in Missouri before moving to Maryland), Blair predicted that emancipation would push loyal Union supporters in those states to the secessionists’ side. Furthermore, it would cause such an outcry among conservatives throughout the North that Republicans would lose the upcoming fall elections. Lincoln had considered every aspect of Blair’s objections but had concluded that the importance of the slavery issue far exceeded party politics. He reminded Blair of his own persistent efforts to seek compromise. He would, however, willingly allow Blair to lodge written objections.

That Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase, the most ardent abolitionist in the cabinet, recoiled from the president’s initiative was irksome. “It went beyond anything I have recommended,” Chase admitted, but he feared that wholesale emancipation would lead to “massacre on the one hand and support for the insurrection on the other.” Far better to deal with the dangerous issue piecemeal, in the incremental fashion General David Hunter had employed earlier that spring when he issued an order freeing the slaves within the territory of his command, which encompassed South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Although Chase and his fellow abolitionists had been sorely tried when Lincoln summarily annulled Hunter’s order, Lincoln had held firm: “No commanding general shall do such a thing, upon my responsibility,” he had said. He would not “feel justified” in leaving such a complex issue “to the decision of commanders in the field.” A comprehensive policy was precisely what executive leadership entailed.

Secretary of State William Seward had an internationalist perspective and, consequently, transatlantic anxieties. If the proclamation provoked a racial war that interrupted the production of cotton, the ruling classes in England and France, dependent on American cotton to feed their textile mills, might intervene in behalf of the Confederacy. Lincoln had weighed the force of this argument, too, but was convinced that the masses in England and France, who had earlier pressured their governments to abolish slavery, would never be maneuvered into supporting the Confederacy once the Union truly committed itself to emancipation.

Know when to hold back and when to move forward.

Despite the cacophony of ideas and contending voices, Lincoln remained fixed upon his course of action. Before the meeting came to an end, Seward raised the sensitive question of timing. “The depression of the public mind, consequent upon



our repeated reversals is so great,” Seward argued, that the proclamation might be seen as “our last shriek, on the retreat.” Far preferable to wait “until the eagle of victory takes its flight” and then “hang your proclamation around its neck.”

“It was an aspect of the case that, in all my thought upon the subject, I had entirely overlooked,” Lincoln said afterward. “The result was that I put the draft of the proclamation aside.” For two months he bided his time, awaiting word from the battlefield that the “eagle of victory” had taken flight. At last the tide turned with the retreat of Lee’s army from Maryland and Pennsylvania. The battle at Antietam, with some 23,000 dead, was the bloodiest single day of combat in American history. Overwhelming carnage left both sides in a paralytic stupor. This nightmare was not the resounding victory Lincoln had hoped and prayed for, but it proved sufficient to set his plan in motion. No sooner had the news of Antietam reached him than he revised the preliminary draft of the proclamation. Only five days after the “victory,” on Monday, September 22, he once again convened the cabinet.

The moment had come for taking the action he had postponed in July. “I wish it were a better time,” he said, abruptly launching into the grave matter of emancipation. “I wish that we were in a better condition.” However, he divulged, as witnessed by Chase and recorded in his diary, “I made the promise to myself and (hesitating a little) to my Maker” that if Lee’s army were “driven out” of Maryland,

the proclamation would be issued. The decision was “fixed and unalterable,” Lincoln declared. “The act and all its responsibilities were his alone.” He had “pondered over it for weeks, and been more confirmed in the rectitude of the measure as time passed on.” That clearly established, Lincoln read his slightly amended version of the proclamation.

If the members of this most unusual team—a microcosm of the disparate factions within the Union itself—were unable to coalesce at this critical juncture, there would be small chance of binding the country at large.

Set an example. How was it possible to coordinate these inordinately prideful, ambitious, quarrelsome, jealous, supremely gifted men to support a fundamental shift in the purpose of the war? The best answer can be found in Lincoln’s compassion, self-awareness, and humility. He never allowed his ambition to consume his kindheartedness. “So long as I have been here,” Lincoln maintained, “I have not willingly planted a thorn in any man’s bosom.”

In his everyday interactions with the team, there was no room for mean-spirited behavior, for grudges or personal resentments. He welcomed arguments within the cabinet but would be “greatly pained,” he warned his colleagues, if he found them attacking one another in public. Such sniping “would be a wrong to me; and much worse, a wrong to the country.” The standards of decorum he demanded were based on the understanding that they were all involved in a challenge “too vast for malicious dealing.” This sense of common purpose had guided the formation of the cabinet and would now sustain its survival.

Understand the emotional needs of the team. An ongoing attentiveness to the multiple needs of the complex individuals in his cabinet shaped Lincoln’s team leadership. From the start Lincoln recognized that Seward, with his commanding national and international reputation, merited the preeminent position of secretary of state and required special treatment. Not only attracted by Seward’s cosmopolitan glamour and the pleasure of his sophisticated company but also sensitive to his colleague’s hurt pride in losing the Republican presidential nomination that had widely been expected to be his, Lincoln frequently crossed the street to pay a visit to Seward’s townhouse at Lafayette Park. There the two men spent long evenings before a blazing fire, talking, laughing, telling stories, developing a mutually bolstering camaraderie. Lincoln formed an equally intimate, though less convivial, bond with the high-strung, abrasive Stanton. “The pressure on him is immeasurable,” Lincoln said of “Mars,” as he affectionately nicknamed his war secretary. Lincoln was willing to do anything he could to assuage that stress, if only by sitting with Stanton in the telegraph office,

holding his hand as they anxiously awaited bulletins from the battlefield.

Reliant above all on Seward and Stanton, Lincoln was aware of the jealousy engendered by the specter of favoritism. Accordingly, he found exclusive time for each team member—whether flagging down Welles on the pathway leading from the White House to the Navy Department, suddenly dropping in at Chase’s stately mansion, dining with the entire Blair clan, or inviting Bates and Smith for conversation on late-afternoon carriage rides.

“Every one likes a compliment,” Lincoln observed; people need praise for the work they do. He frequently penned notes to his colleagues, expressing his gratitude for their actions. He publicly acknowledged that Seward’s suggestion to await a military victory before issuing the proclamation was an original and useful contribution. When he had to issue an order to Welles, he assured his “Neptune” that it was not his intention to insinuate “that you have been remiss in the performance of the arduous and responsible duties of your Department, which I take pleasure in affirming had, in your hands, been conducted with admirable success.” When compelled to remove one of Chase’s appointees, he understood that the prickly Chase might well be resentful. Not wanting the situation to deteriorate, he called on Chase that evening. Placing his long arms on Chase’s shoulders, he patiently explained why the decision was necessary. Though the ambitious Chase often chafed under Lincoln’s authority, he acknowledged that “the President has always treated me with such personal kindness and has always manifested such fairness and integrity of purpose, that I have not found myself free to throw up my trust...so I still work on.”

Refuse to let past resentments fester. Lincoln never selected members of his team “by his like, or dislike of them,” his old friend Leonard Swett observed. He insisted that he did not care if someone had done wrong in the past; “it is enough if the man does no wrong hereafter.” Lincoln’s adherence to this rule opened the door to Stanton’s appointment as secretary of war, despite a troubled early history between the two men. They had first crossed paths on a major patent case in Cincinnati. Stanton, a brilliant and hard-driving lawyer, had already earned a national reputation; Lincoln was an emerging figure only in Illinois. One look at Lincoln—hair askew, shirt stained, coat sleeves and trousers too short to fit his long arms and legs—and Stanton turned to his partner, George Harding: “Why did you bring that d—d long armed Ape here...he does not know anything and can do you no good.” And with that, Stanton dismissed the prairie lawyer. He never opened the brief Lincoln had meticulously prepared, never consulted him, didn’t even speak a word with him.



Out of that humiliation, however, came a powerful self-scrutiny on Lincoln's part, a savage desire to improve himself. He remained in the courtroom the entire week, intently studying Stanton's legal performance. He had never before "seen anything so finished and elaborated, and so thoroughly prepared." Stanton's partner recalled that although Lincoln never forgot the sting of that episode, "when convinced that the interest of the nation would be best served by bringing Stanton into his cabinet, he suppressed his personal resentment, as not many men would have done, and made the appointment."

"No two men were ever more utterly and irreconcilably unlike," Stanton's private secretary observed. Whereas Lincoln would give "a wayward subordinate" too many chances "to repair his errors," Stanton "was for forcing him to obey or cutting off his head." Whereas Lincoln was compassionate, patient, and transparent, Stanton was blunt, intense, and secretive. "They supplemented each other's nature, and they fully recognized that they were a necessity to each other." Before the end of their partnership, Stanton not only revered Lincoln; he loved him.

Control angry impulses. When infuriated by a colleague, Lincoln would fling off what he called a "hot" letter, releasing all his pent wrath. He would then put the letter aside until he had cooled down and could attend to the matter with a clearer eye. When his papers were opened at the beginning of the 20th century, historians discovered a raft of such letters, with Lincoln's notation underneath: "never sent and never signed."

Such forbearance set an example for the team. One evening Lincoln listened as Stanton worked himself into a fury against one of the generals. "I would like to tell him what I think of him," Stanton stormed. "Why don't you?" suggested Lincoln. "Write it all down."

When Stanton finished the letter, he returned and read it to the president. "Capital," Lincoln said. "Now, Stanton, what are you going to do about it?"

"Why, send it, of course!"

"I wouldn't," said the president. "Throw it in the waste-paper basket."

"But it took me two days to write."

"Yes, yes, and it did you ever so much good," Lincoln said. "You feel better now. That is all that is necessary. Just throw it in the basket." And after some additional grumbling, Stanton did just that.

Not only would Lincoln hold back until his anger subsided and counsel others to do likewise; he would readily forgive intemperate public attacks on himself. When an unflattering letter Blair had written about Lincoln in the early days of the war unexpectedly surfaced in the press months later, the embarrassed Blair carried the letter to the White House and

offered to resign. Lincoln told him he had no intention of reading it, nor any desire to exact retribution. "Forget it," he said, "and never mention or think of it again."

Protect colleagues from blame. Time and again, Welles marveled, Lincoln "declared that he, and not his Cabinet, was in fault for errors imputed to them." His refusal to let a subordinate take the blame for his decisions was never more apparent than in his public defense of Stanton after McClellan attributed the Peninsula disaster to the War Department's failure to send sufficient troops. A vicious public assault upon Stanton ensued, with subsequent calls for his resignation.

To create a dramatic backdrop that would garner extensive newspaper coverage, Lincoln issued an order to close down all the government departments at one o'clock so that everyone might attend a massive Union rally on the Capitol steps. There Lincoln directly countered McClellan's charge. He insisted that every possible soldier available had been sent to reinforce the general. "The Secretary of War is not to blame for not giving what he had none to give." Then, as the applause mounted, Lincoln continued: "I believe [Stanton] is a brave and able man, and I stand here, as justice requires me to do, to take upon myself what has been charged on the Secretary of War." Lincoln's robust and dramatic defense of his beleaguered secretary summarily extinguished the campaign against Stanton.

In the end it was Lincoln's character—his consistent sensitivity, patience, prudence, and empathy—that inspired and transformed every member of his official family. In this paradigm of team leadership, greatness was firmly grounded in goodness. And yet, beneath Lincoln's tenderness and kindness, he was without question the most complex, ambitious, willful, and implacable leader of them all. His team members could trumpet self-serving ambitions; they could criticize Lincoln, mock him, irritate him, infuriate him, exacerbate the pressure upon him. Everything would be tolerated so long as they pursued their jobs with passion and skill, so long as they were headed in the direction he had defined for them.

Certainly there was no perfect unanimity on September 22, 1862, when Lincoln told the cabinet he was ready to publish his preliminary proclamation. Differences of opinion and reservations persisted. Welles remained vexed, but if the president was willing to take the full weight of responsibility, he was ready to assent. "Fully satisfied" that the president had accorded every argument a "kind and considerate consideration," Chase came aboard. Smith abandoned his threat to resign, and Blair never took up Lincoln's invitation to file written objections. When the proclamation appeared in newspapers the following day, the entire cabinet, unlikely

The abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass judged that “if [Lincoln] has taught us to confide in nothing else, he has taught us to confide in his word.”

as it had first appeared, stood behind the president. When it counted most, they presented a united front.

WINNING OVER THE skeptics in his own cabinet was but an early step in the journey to reunite the nation. A hundred days remained between the publication of the Emancipation Proclamation and its intended activation, on January 1, 1863. They were not to be tranquil ones. This distressing period would provide a critical test of Lincoln’s leadership. As Blair had predicted, conservative resentment against the proclamation produced withering results for Republicans in the midterms. “We have lost almost everything,” Lincoln’s secretary, John Nicolay, lamented. In December the Union army fell into the trap of “a slaughter pen” at Fredericksburg, leaving 13,000 Union soldiers dead or wounded. A blizzard of recriminations beset the president from all sides.

Keep your word. As the first of January drew near, the public displayed a “general air of doubt” as to whether the president would follow through on his pledge to put the proclamation into effect on that day. Critics predicted that its enactment would foment race wars in the South, cause Union officers to resign their commands, and prompt 100,000 men to lay down their arms. The prospect of emancipation threatened to fracture the brittle coalition that had held Republicans and Union Democrats together.

“Will Lincoln’s backbone carry him through?” wondered a skeptical New Yorker. Those who knew Abraham Lincoln best would not have posed that question. All through his life, the honor and weight of his word had been ballast to his character. “My word is out,” Lincoln told a Massachusetts congressman, “and I can’t take it back.”

Though often frustrated by Lincoln’s slowness in issuing the proclamation, the abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass had come to believe that Lincoln was not a man “to reconsider, retract, and contradict words and purposes solemnly proclaimed.” Correctly, he judged that Lincoln would “take no step backward,” that “if he has taught us to confide in nothing else, he has taught us to confide in his word.”

Gauge sentiment. The day before the New Year, Lincoln convened his cabinet a third time for a final reading of the proclamation. The version he presented differed in one major respect from the one published in September. For months, abolitionists had argued for enlisting blacks in the armed services. Lincoln had hesitated, regarding such a radical step as premature and hazardous for his fragile coalition.

Now, however, he decided the time had come. “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present,” he told Congress. “As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.” A new clause declaring that the army would commence

with the recruitment of blacks had been inserted in the proclamation, along with a humble closing appeal, suggested by Secretary Chase, for “the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.”

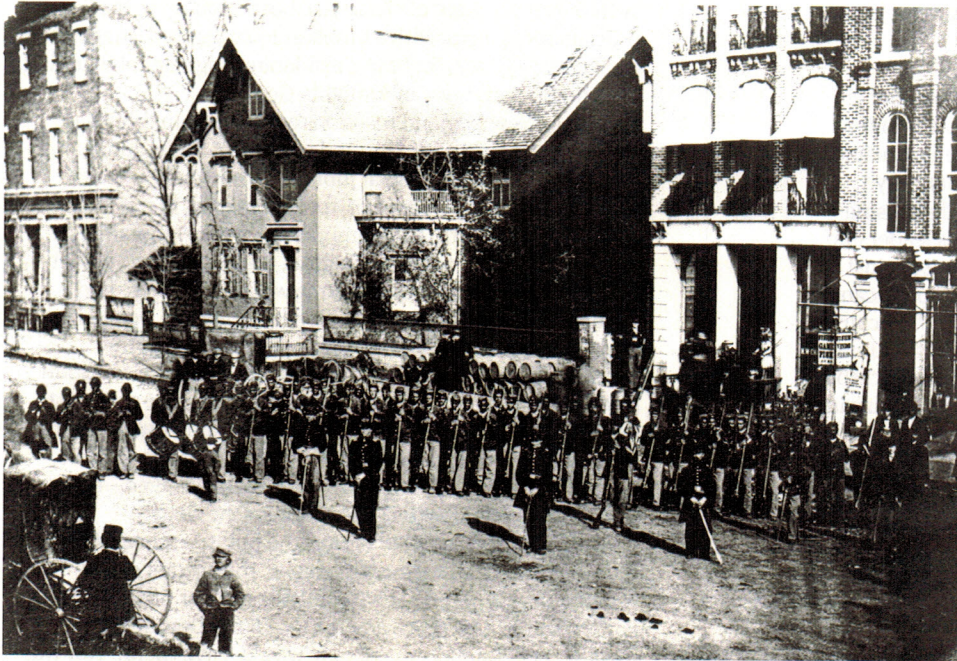
Across New England reaction to the proclamation was “wild and grand,” with “Joy and gladness,” “sobs and tears,” according to Douglass. That jubilation, however, was not shared in the border states or, for that matter, in much of the rest of the North. If a marginal victory at Antietam had muted opposition to emancipation, the humiliating defeat at Fredericksburg and the ensuing winter stalemate had raised anger to full volume. In Congress, “Peace Democrats,” popularly known as Copperheads, capitalizing on the protracted slough of morale, opposed the new conscription laws and even went so far as to openly encourage soldiers to desert. Anecdotal reports from the army camps suggested that emancipation was having a negative effect on the soldiers, numbers of whom claimed they had been deceived—they had signed up to fight for the Union, not for the Negro.

But Lincoln knew how to read the public’s mood. When his old friend Orville Browning raised the specter of the North’s uniting behind the Democrats in their “clamor for compromise,” Lincoln predicted that if the Democrats moved toward concessions, “the people would leave them.” Nor was he worried that emancipation would splinter the army. While he conceded that wavering morale had inflamed tensions over emancipation and might lead to desertions, he did not believe that “the number would materially affect the army.” On the contrary, those inspired by emancipation to volunteer would more than make up for those who left. Lincoln was certain, he told the swarm of doubters, that the timing was right for this repurposing of the war.

Indeed, nowhere was the effect of Abraham Lincoln’s transformative leadership illustrated more sharply than in soldiers’ changed attitudes toward emancipation. During the first 18 months of the war, only three out of 10 soldiers professed a willingness to risk their lives for emancipation. The majority were fighting solely to preserve the Union. That ratio shifted in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation. Following Lincoln’s lead, an overwhelming majority of soldiers came to view emancipation and the restoration of the Union as inseparably linked. How had Lincoln transferred his purpose to those men?

Establish trust. The response of the troops was grounded in the deep trust and loyalty Lincoln had earned among rank-and-file soldiers from the very beginning of the war. In letters they wrote home, accounts of his empathy, responsibility, kindness, accessibility, and fatherly compassion for his extended family were commonplace. They spoke of him as one of their own;

Part of the 127th Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry—the first completely African-American regiment recruited in Ohio—probably in 1863. It was later redesignated the 5th Regiment, United States Colored Troops.



emancipation policy, and the use of colored troops, constitute the heaviest blow yet dealt to the rebellion.”

Lincoln had carefully observed “this great revolution in public sentiment slowly but surely progressing.” He was a keen listener and monitored the shifting opinions of his cabinet members. He was a shrewd reader, noting the direction of the wind in newspaper editorials, in the tenor of conversations among people in the North, and most centrally, in the opinion of the troops. Although he had known all along that opposition would be fierce when the proclamation was actuated, he judged that opposition to be of insufficient strength “to defeat the purpose.” This acute sense of timing, one journalist wrote, was the secret to Lincoln’s gifted leadership: “He always moves in conjunction with propitious circumstances, not waiting to be dragged by the force of events or wasting strength in premature struggles with them.” As Lincoln

himself pointed out, “With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.”

AT A TIME when the spirits of the people were depleted and war fatigue was widespread, Lincoln had gotten a powerful second wind. Where others saw the apocalyptic demise of the Founders’ experiment, he saw the birth of a new freedom.

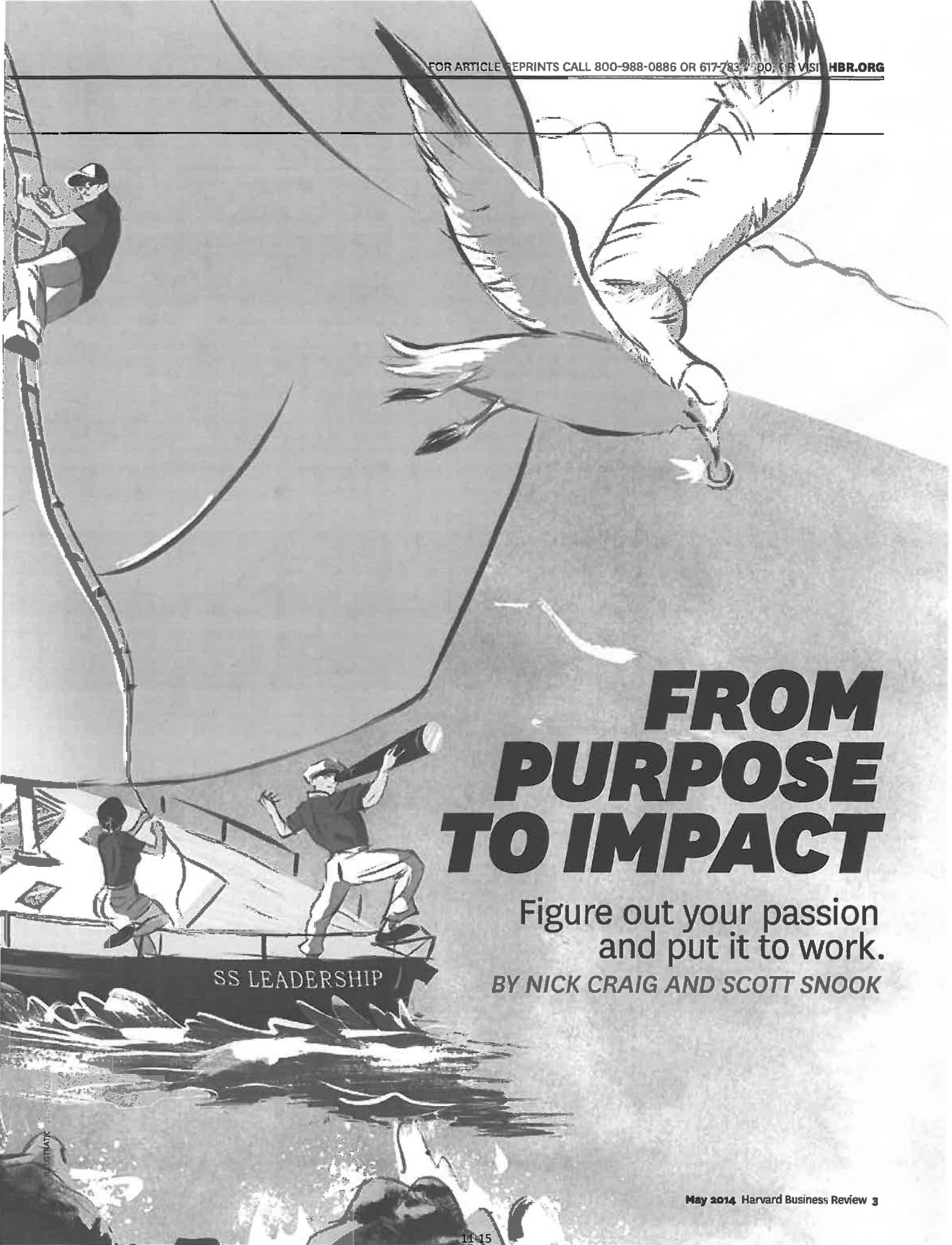
“Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history,” he told Congress a month before he put the Emancipation Proclamation into effect. “The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation....In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.”

In a great convergence of the man and the times, Abraham Lincoln’s leadership imprinted a moral purpose and meaning on the protracted misery of the Civil War. 🗣️

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN is a historian and the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of several biographies of U.S. presidents, including *No Ordinary Time*, *Team of Rivals*, *The Bully Pulpit*, and *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*. Her newest book is *Leadership in Turbulent Times* (Simon & Schuster, September 2018).

they carried his picture into battle. Such was the credibility that Lincoln had established with them that it was no longer a question of fighting solely for the Union. “If he says all Slaves are hereafter Forever Free,” wrote one soldier, “Amen.” Another confessed that he had “never been in favor of the abolition of slavery” but was now “ready and willing” to fight for emancipation. A new direction had been set and accepted.

Nothing would drive home the transformative power of the Emancipation Proclamation more powerfully than the recruitment and enlistment of black soldiers. Blacks responded fervently to the enlistment call. Not only did they sign up in record numbers—adding nearly 200,000 troops to the Union war effort—but, according to official testimony, they fought with striking gallantry. “I never saw such fighting as was done by the negro regiment,” General James G. Blunt wrote after one early engagement. “They fought like veterans with a coolness and valor that is unsurpassed.” After the battle at Port Hudson, a white officer openly confessed, “You have no idea how my prejudices with regard to negro troops have been dispelled by the battle the other day. The brigade of negroes behaved magnificently and fought splendidly; could not have done better.” Even commanders formerly opposed to his proclamation, Lincoln stressed, now “believe the



FROM PURPOSE TO IMPACT

Figure out your passion
and put it to work.

BY NICK CRAIG AND SCOTT SNOOK

The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.

— Mark Twain

Over the past five years, there's been an explosion of interest in purpose-driven leadership. Academics argue persuasively that an executive's most important role is to be a steward of the organization's purpose. Business experts make the case that purpose is a key to exceptional performance, while psychologists describe it as the pathway to greater well-being.

Doctors have even found that people with purpose in their lives are less prone to disease. Purpose is increasingly being touted as the key to navigating the complex, volatile, ambiguous world we face today, where strategy is ever changing and few decisions are obviously right or wrong.

Despite this growing understanding, however, a big challenge remains. In our work training thousands of managers at organizations from GE to the Girl Scouts, and teaching an equal number of executives and students at Harvard Business School, we've found that fewer than 20% of leaders have a strong sense of their own individual purpose. Even fewer can distill their purpose into a concrete statement. They may be able to clearly articulate their organization's mission: Think of Google's "To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," or Charles Schwab's "A relentless ally for the individual investor." But when asked to describe their own purpose, they typically fall back on something generic and nebulous: "Help others excel." "Ensure success." "Empower my people." Just as problematic, hardly any of them have a clear plan for translating purpose into action. As a result, they limit their aspirations and often fail to achieve their most ambitious professional and personal goals.

Our purpose is to change that—to help executives find and define their leadership purpose and put it to use. Building on the seminal work of our colleague Bill George, our programs initially covered a wide range of topics related to authentic leadership, but in recent years purpose has emerged as the cornerstone of our teaching and coaching. Executives tell us it is the key to accelerating their growth and deepening their impact, in both their professional and personal lives. Indeed, we believe that the process of articulating your purpose and finding the courage to live it—what we call *purpose to impact*—is the single most important developmental task you can undertake as a leader.

Consider Dolf van den Brink, the president and CEO of Heineken USA. Working with us, he identified a decidedly unique purpose statement—"To be the wuxia

master who saves the kingdom"—which reflects his love of Chinese kung fu movies, the inspiration he takes from the wise, skillful warriors in them, and the realization that he, too, revels in high-risk situations that compel him to take action. With that impetus, he was able to create a plan for reviving a challenged legacy business during extremely difficult economic conditions. We've also watched a retail operations chief call on his newly clarified purpose—"Compelled to make things better, whomever, wherever, however"—to make the "hard, cage-rattling changes" needed to beat back a global competitor. And we've seen a factory director in Egypt use his



Idea in Brief

THE PROBLEM

Purpose is increasingly seen as the key to navigating the complex world we face today, where strategy is ever changing and few decisions are obviously right or wrong. At the same time, few leaders have a strong sense of their own leadership purpose or a clear plan for translating it into action. As a result, they often fail to achieve their most ambitious professional and personal goals.

THE SOLUTION

The first step toward uncovering your leadership purpose is to mine your life story for major themes that reveal your lifelong passions and values. Next, craft a concise purpose statement that leaves you emboldened and energized. Finally, develop a *purpose-to-impact plan*.

Effective plans:

- Use language that is uniquely meaningful to you

- Focus on big-picture aspirations and then set shorter-term goals, working backward with increasing specificity
- Emphasize the strengths you bring to the table
- Take a holistic view of work and family

purpose—“Create families that excel”—to persuade employees that they should honor the 2012 protest movement not by joining the marches but by maintaining their loyalties to one another and keeping their shared operation running.

We’ve seen similar results outside the corporate world. Kathi Snook (Scott’s wife) is a retired army colonel who’d been struggling to reengage in work after several years as a stay-at-home mom. But after nailing her purpose statement—“To be the gentle, behind-the-scenes, kick-in-the-ass reason for success,” something she’d done throughout her military career and with her kids—she decided to run for a hotly contested school committee seat, and won.

And we’ve implemented this thinking across organizations. Unilever is a company that is committed to purpose-driven leadership, and Jonathan Donner, the head of global learning there, has been a key partner in refining our approach. Working with his company and several other organizations, we’ve helped more than 1,000 leaders through the purpose-to-impact process and have begun to track and review their progress over the past two to three years. Many have seen dramatic results, ranging from two-step promotions to sustained improvement in business results. Most important, the vast majority tell us they’ve developed a new ability to thrive in even the most challenging times.

In this article, we share our step-by-step framework to start you down the same path. We’ll explain how to identify your purpose and then develop an impact plan to achieve concrete results.

WHAT IS PURPOSE?

Most of us go to our graves with our music still inside us, unplayed.

— Oliver Wendell Holmes

Your leadership purpose is who you are and what makes you distinctive. Whether you’re an entrepre-

neur at a start-up or the CEO of a *Fortune* 500 company, a call center rep or a software developer, your purpose is your brand, what you’re driven to achieve, the magic that makes you tick. It’s not *what* you do, it’s *how* you do your job and *why*—the strengths and passions you bring to the table no matter where you’re seated. Although you may express your purpose in different ways in different contexts, it’s what everyone close to you recognizes as uniquely you and would miss most if you were gone.

When Kathi shared her purpose statement with her family and friends, the response was instantaneous and overwhelming: “Yes! That’s you—all business, all the time!” In every role and every context—as captain of the army gymnastics team, as a math teacher at West Point, informally with her family and friends—she had always led from behind, a gentle but forceful catalyst for others’ success. Through this new lens, she was able to see herself—and her future—more clearly. When Dolf van den Brink revealed his newly articulated purpose to his wife, she easily recognized the “wuxia master” who had led his employees through the turmoil of serious fighting and unrest in the Congo and was now ready to attack the challenges at Heineken USA head-on.

At its core, your leadership purpose springs from your identity, the essence of who you are. Purpose is not a list of the education, experience, and skills you’ve gathered in your life. We’ll use ourselves as examples: The fact that Scott is a retired army colonel with an MBA and a PhD is not his purpose. His purpose is “to help others live more ‘meaning-full’ lives.” Purpose is also not a professional title, limited to your current job or organization. Nick’s purpose is not “To lead the Authentic Leadership Institute.” That’s his job. His purpose is “To wake you up and have you find that you are home.” He has been doing just that since he was a teenager, and if you sit next to him on the shuttle from Boston to New

York, he'll wake you up (figuratively), too. He simply can't help himself.

Purpose is definitely not some jargon-filled catch-all ("Empower my team to achieve exceptional business results while delighting our customers"). It should be specific and personal, resonating with you and you alone. It doesn't have to be aspirational or cause-based ("Save the whales" or "Feed the hungry"). And it's not what you think it should be. It's who you can't help being. In fact, it might not necessarily be all that flattering ("Be the thorn in people's side that keeps them moving!").

HOW DO YOU FIND IT?

To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.

— E.E. Cummings

Finding your leadership purpose is not easy. If it were, we'd all know exactly why we're here and be living that purpose every minute of every day. As E.E. Cummings suggests, we are constantly bombarded by powerful messages (from parents, bosses, management gurus, advertisers, celebrities) about what we should be (smarter, stronger, richer) and about how to lead (empower others, lead from behind, be authentic, distribute power). To figure out who you are in such a world, let alone "be nobody but yourself," is indeed hard work. However, our experience shows that when you have a clear sense of who you are, everything else follows naturally.

Some people will come to the purpose-to-impact journey with a natural bent toward introspection and reflection. Others will find the experience uncomfortable and anxiety-provoking. A few will just roll their eyes. We've worked with leaders of all stripes and can attest that even the most skeptical discover personal and professional value in the experience. At one multinational corporation, we worked with a senior lawyer who characterized himself as "the least likely person to ever find this stuff useful." Yet he became such a supporter that he required all his people to do the program. "I have never read a self-help book, and I don't plan to," he told his staff. "But if you want to become an exceptional leader, you have to know your leadership purpose." The key to engaging both the dreamers and the skeptics is to build a process that has room to express individuality but also offers step-by-step practical guidance.

The first task is to mine your life story for common threads and major themes. The point is to identify your core, lifelong strengths, values, and passions—those pursuits that energize you and bring you joy. We

use a variety of prompts but have found three to be most effective:

- What did you especially love doing when you were a child, before the world told you what you should or shouldn't like or do? Describe a moment and how it made you feel.
- Tell us about two of your most challenging life experiences. How have they shaped you?
- What do you enjoy doing in your life now that helps you sing your song?

We strongly recommend grappling with these questions in a small group of a few peers, because we've found that it's almost impossible for people to identify their leadership purpose by themselves.



You can't get a clear picture of yourself without trusted colleagues or friends to act as mirrors.

After this reflective work, take a shot at crafting a clear, concise, and declarative statement of purpose: "My leadership purpose is ____." The words in your purpose statement must be yours. They must capture your essence. And they must call you to action.

To give you an idea of how the process works, consider the experiences of a few executives. When we asked one manager about her childhood passions, she told us about growing up in rural Scotland and delighting in "discovery" missions. One day, she and a friend set out determined to find frogs and spent the whole day going from pond to pond, turning over every stone. Just before dark, she discovered a single frog and was triumphant. The purpose statement she later crafted—"Always find the frogs!"—is perfect for her current role as the senior VP of R&D for her company.

Another executive used two "crucible" life experiences to craft her purpose. The first was personal: Years before, as a divorced young mother of two, she found herself homeless and begging on the street, but she used her wits to get back on her feet. The second was professional: During the economic crisis of 2008, she had to oversee her company's retrenchment from Asia and was tasked with closing the flagship operation in the region. Despite the near hopeless job environment, she was able to help every one of her employees find another job before letting them go. After discussing these stories with her group, she shifted her purpose statement from "Continually and consistently develop and facilitate the growth and development of myself and others leading to great performance" to "With tenacity, create brilliance."

Dolf came to his "wuxia master" statement after exploring not only his film preferences but also his extraordinary crucible experience in the Congo, when militants were threatening the brewery he managed and he had to order it barricaded to protect his employees and prevent looting. The Egyptian factory director focused on family as his purpose because his stories revealed that familial love and support had been the key to facing every challenge in his life, while the retail operations chief used "Compelled to improve" after realizing that his greatest achievements had always come when he pushed himself and others out of their comfort zones.

As you review your stories, you will see a unifying thread, just as these executives did. Pull it, and

PURPOSE STATEMENTS	
FROM BAD...	TO GOOD
Lead new markets department to achieve exceptional business results	Eliminate "chaos"
Be a driver in the infrastructure business that allows each person to achieve their needed outcomes while also mastering the new drivers of our business as I balance my family and work demands	Bring water and power to the 2 billion people who do not have it
Continually and consistently develop and facilitate the growth and development of myself and others leading to great performance	With tenacity, create brilliance

you'll uncover your purpose. (The exhibit "Purpose Statements: From Bad to Good" offers sampling of purpose statements.)

HOW DO YOU PUT YOUR PURPOSE INTO ACTION?

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.

— George Bernard Shaw

Clarifying your purpose as a leader is critical, but writing the statement is not enough. You must also envision the impact you'll have on your world as a result of living your purpose. Your actions—not your words—are what really matter. Of course, it's virtually impossible for any of us to fully live into our purpose 100% of the time. But with work and careful planning, we can do it more often, more consciously, wholeheartedly, and effectively.

Purpose-to-impact plans differ from traditional development plans in several important ways: They start with a statement of leadership purpose rather than of a business or career goal. They take a holistic view of professional and personal life rather than ignore the fact that you have a family or outside inter-

PURPOSE-TO-IMPACT PLANNING	TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING
Uses meaningful, purpose-infused language	Uses standard business language
Is focused on strengths to realize career aspirations	Is focused on weaknesses to address performance
Elicits a statement of leadership purpose that explains how you will lead	States a business- or career-driven goal
Sets incremental goals related to living your leadership purpose	Measures success using metrics tied to the firm's mission and goals
Focuses on the future, working backward	Focuses on the present, working forward
Is unique to you; addresses who you are as a leader	Is generic; addresses the job or role
Takes a holistic view of work and family	Ignores goals and responsibilities outside the office

ests and commitments. They incorporate meaningful, purpose-infused language to create a document that speaks to you, not just to any person in your job or role. They force you to envision long-term opportunities for living your purpose (three to five years out) and then help you to work backward from there (two years out, one year, six months, three months, 30 days) to set specific goals for achieving them.

When executives approach development in this purpose-driven way, their aspirations—for instance, Kathi's decision to get involved in the school board, or the Egyptian factory director's ambition to run manufacturing and logistics across the Middle East—are stoked. Leaders also become more energized in their current roles. Dolf's impact plan inspired him to tackle his role at Heineken USA with four mottos for his team: "Be brave," "Decide and do," "Hunt as a pack," and "Take it personally." When Unilever executive Jostein Solheim created a development plan around his purpose—"To be part of a global move-

ment that makes changing the world seem fun and achievable"—he realized he wanted to stay on as CEO of the Ben & Jerry's business rather than moving up the corporate ladder.

Let's now look at a hypothetical purpose-to-impact plan (representing a composite of several people with whom we've worked) for an in-depth view of the process. "Richard" arrived at his purpose only after being prodded into talking about his lifelong passion for sailing; suddenly, he'd found a set of experiences and language that could redefine how he saw his job in procurement.

Richard's development plan leads with the **PURPOSE STATEMENT** he crafted: "To harness all the elements to win the race." This is followed by an **EXPLANATION** of why that's his purpose: Research shows that understanding what motivates us dramatically increases our ability to achieve big goals.

Next, Richard addresses his **THREE- TO FIVE-YEAR GOALS** using the language of his purpose statement. We find that this is a good time frame to target first; several years is long enough that even the most disillusioned managers could imagine they'd actually be living into their purpose by then. But it's not so distant that it creates complacency. A goal might be to land a top job—in Richard's case, a global procurement role—but the focus should be on how you will do it, what kind of leader you'll be.

Then he considers **TWO-YEAR GOALS**. This is a time frame in which the grand future and current reality begin to merge. What new responsibilities will you take on? What do you have to do to set yourself up for the longer term? Remember to address your personal life, too, because you should be more fully living into your purpose everywhere. Richard's goals explicitly reference his family, or "shore team."

The fifth step—setting **ONE-YEAR GOALS**—is often the most challenging. Many people ask, "What if most of what I am doing today isn't aligned in any way with my leadership purpose? How do I get from here to there?" We've found two ways to address this problem. First, think about whether you can rewrite the narrative on parts of your work, or change the way you do some tasks, so that they become an expression of your purpose. For example, the phrase "seaworthy boat" helps Richard see the meaning in managing a basic procurement process. Second, consider whether you can add an activity that is 100% aligned with your purpose. We've found that most people can manage to devote 5% to 10% of their time to something that energizes

A Purpose-to-Impact Plan

them and helps others see their strengths. Take Richard's decision to contribute to the global strategic procurement effort: It's not part of his "day job," but it gets him involved in a more purpose-driven project.


Now we get to the nitty-gritty. What are the **CRITICAL NEXT STEPS** that you must take in the coming six months, three months, and 30 days to accomplish the one-year goals you've set out? The importance of small wins is well documented in almost every management discipline from change initiatives to innovation. In detailing your next steps, don't write down all the requirements of your job. List the activities or results that are most critical given your newly clarified leadership purpose and ambitions. You'll probably notice that a number of your tasks seem much less urgent than they did before, while others you had pushed to the side take priority.

Finally, we look at the **KEY RELATIONSHIPS** needed to turn your plan into reality. Identify two or three people who can help you live more fully into your leadership purpose. For Richard, it is Sarah, the HR manager who will help him assemble his crew, and his wife, Jill, the manager of his "shore team."

Executives tell us that their individual purpose-to-impact plans help them stay true to their short- and long-term goals, inspiring courage, commitment, and focus. When they're frustrated or flagging, they pull out the plans to remind themselves what they want to accomplish and how they'll succeed. After creating his plan, the retail operations chief facing global competition said he's no longer "shying away from things that are too hard." Dolf van den Brink said: "I'm much clearer on where I really can contribute and where not. I have full clarity on the kind of roles I aspire to and can make explicit choices along the way."

WHAT CREATES the greatest leaders and companies? Each of them operates from a slightly different set of assumptions about the world, their industry, what can or can't be done. That individual perspective allows them to create great value and have significant impact. They all operate with a unique leadership purpose. To be a truly effective leader, you must do the same. Clarify your purpose, and put it to work. ▣

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 **Nick Craig** is the president of the Authentic Leadership Institute. **Scott Snook** is the MBA Class of 1958 Senior Lecturer of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.

This sample plan shows how "Richard" uses his unique leadership purpose to envision big-picture aspirations and then work backward to set more-specific goals.

1 CREATE PURPOSE STATEMENT

To harness all the elements to win the race

2 WRITE EXPLANATION

I love to sail. In my teens and 20s, I raced high-performance three-man skiffs and almost made it to the Olympics. Now sailing is my hobby and passion—a challenge that requires discipline, balance, and coordination. You never know what the wind will do next, and in the end, you win the race only by relying on your team's combined capabilities, intuition, and flow. It's all about how you read the elements.

3 SET THREE- TO FIVE-YEAR GOALS

Be known for training the best crews and winning the big races: Take on a global procurement role and use the opportunity to push my organization ahead of competitors

HOW WILL I DO IT?

- Make everyone feel they're part of the same team
- Navigate unpredictable conditions by seeing wind shears before everyone else
- Keep calm when we lose individual races; learn and prepare for the next ones

Celebrate my shore team: Make sure the family has one thing we do that binds us

4 SET TWO-YEAR GOALS

Win the gold: Implement a new procurement model, redefining our relationship with suppliers and generating 10% cost savings for the company

Tackle next-level racing challenge:

Move into a European role with broader responsibilities

HOW WILL I DO IT?

- Anticipate and then face the tough challenges
- Insist on innovative yet rigorous and pragmatic solutions
- Assemble and train the winning crew

Develop my shore team: Teach the boys to sail

5 SET ONE-YEAR GOALS

Target the gold: Begin to develop new procurement process

Win the short race: Deliver Sympix project ahead of expectations

Build a seaworthy boat: Keep TFLS process within cost and cash forecast

HOW WILL I DO IT?

- Accelerate team reconfiguration
 - Get buy-in from management for new procurement approach
- Invest in my shore team:** Take a two-week vacation, no e-mail

6 MAP OUT CRITICAL NEXT STEPS

Assemble the crew: Finalize key hires

Chart the course: Lay the groundwork for Sympix and TFLS projects

HOW WILL I DO IT?

SIX MONTHS:

- Finalize succession plans
- Set out Sympix timeline

THREE MONTHS:

- Land a world-class replacement for Jim
- Schedule "action windows" to focus with no e-mail

30 DAYS:

- Bring Alex in Shanghai on board
- Agree on TFLS metrics
- Conduct one-day Sympix offsite

Reconnect with my shore team: Be more present with Jill and the boys

7 EXAMINE KEY RELATIONSHIPS

Sarah, HR manager

Jill, manager of my "shore team"