

Do You **Really** Want to Lead?

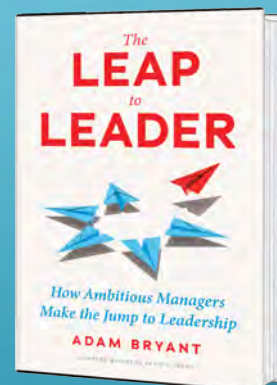
The challenges of leadership have never been greater. In this excerpt from his new book, *The Leap to Leader: How Ambitious Managers Make the Jump to Leadership* (Harvard Business Review Press), *People + Strategy* articles editor Adam Bryant argues that leaders should be crystal clear about their motivations for wanting to lead.

Phil Martens remembers vividly the day he heard the news that Lehman Brothers was declaring bankruptcy—just one of the many implosions of the 2008 financial crisis. At the time, Martens was running an automotive supplier that was preparing to go public, and the shock waves from the Lehman announcement would ultimately scuttle that plan. Martens was driving to work when his chief financial officer called, and Martens started to laugh at first, because he assumed his colleague was joking.

As the news sank in, Martens pulled off the highway and just sat there, wondering what he would do. When his CFO called back an hour later to ask him what they should do, Martens said, “I don’t know.” After a few similar experiences in his career, he came to refer to them as “stoplight moments,” and he counsels up-and-coming leaders to prepare for them.

“You’re going to be driving home one day after some big, new challenge came up at the office,” he said. “You’re going to get to a stoplight and you’re going to start realizing that you don’t know what to do. And then you’re going to realize the stoplight’s been green for a while and you’ve been staring off into oblivion. That’s when you realize how lonely the job is.”

Earlier in her career, Mary Elizabeth Porray built a reputation as a reliable fixer at the consulting firm EY. “The more broken, the more complex, the more difficult the situation that needed to be turned around, I was the person who was called,” she said. “That strength became a payoff for me, like a drug.” But at some point, she realized that to move into higher leadership positions, she couldn’t keep doing all the work herself. “I had to figure out what to let go of in order to lead,” added Porray, who is now the firm’s global deputy vice chair of client technology. “Time is finite, and so how you spend your time becomes incredibly important. So I looked deep in myself and said, ‘What are the things that I couldn’t possibly think about giving away?’ And I gave them away.”



What True Leadership Means

These are just a few of the countless ways that people experience the leap to leader, a jump that has little to do with your title and everything to do with your mindset. It is a realization that you are fully accountable, that you must grapple with the hardest decisions, and that you need to let go of doing the work that earned you promotion after promotion earlier in your career.

It means writing the playbook for your job, rather than running the playbook that your bosses hand you.

It means imagining what could and should be, rather than delivering on expected outcomes.

It is about understanding that leadership is not a popularity contest, and that earning people's respect matters more than having them like you.

It means setting a compass for a new direction and letting others create the road map for executing the plan.

It means unlocking the potential in people that they may not even see for themselves.

It is about giving credit to others and taking blame when things go wrong.

It means always doing what is best for the organization, even if that requires letting go of valued colleagues.

It is about having the courage to take a stand, even if it costs you your job.

It means thinking first about what you can do for people, rather than what they can do for you.

It is about building other leaders, not just followers.

Opening the Cage Door

For some, the leap to leader can be exhilarating, just as it was for Margaret Heffernan, a serial entrepreneur who is also a bestselling author and popular TED Talk speaker. When Heffernan worked at the BBC early in her career, she had to spend a lot of energy working through the thickets of rules that had built up over the decades at the government-run broadcaster.

"There were policies nested in other policies nested in other policies nested in other policies, and you had to be very careful how you navigated through them all," she said. She left the BBC when she was 36 to take the leap into her first CEO role. And there was a moment as she was settling into her new job when she asked her assistant about the company's policy on a certain issue. "She turned to me and said, 'It's whatever you say it is,'" Heffernan recalled. "And I thought, whoa, this is really going to be fun. It was absolutely liberating."

But for others, as Heffernan has seen time and again with the executives she has coached, that freedom can become overwhelming. "As you climb the corporate hierarchy, you're constantly constrained by what you can and can't do," she said. "You have your job description, your goals and targets and your boss's goals and targets. And when you get to the top, you have quite a lot of freedom, but you haven't ever had that before. Many people who find themselves in leadership positions can feel a bit like the cage door is open, but nobody's confident to go through it. The reason is that the constraints in their minds are so profound and ingrained. They have had such long careers of looking for approval that the idea that they can think freely for themselves takes quite a lot of getting used to. That transition can take some work."



Be honest with yourself and clear about why you want to lead, because that 'why' will sustain you through the most difficult moments when you may wonder why you signed up for all these challenges in the first place.

Asking One Key Question

Before anyone steps into a leadership role, there is a threshold question that they need to spend some time wrestling with first, to be certain that they are up for the challenging climb ahead: Do you really want to lead?

It is a question that should be asked more often than it is. As organizations assess and develop leaders, invest in their high potentials and work on succession plans, they often do so with the assumption that if somebody is a high performer, then they will of course want to make the jump from sole contributor to manager to leader. But that thinking needs to be revisited, says Shawna Erdmann, senior vice president of talent and learning at Comcast.

"One aspect that we overlook sometimes is individual ambition and what a person really wants to do," she said. "Often the leaders of a company, including boards and HR, will pick and choose among upcoming executives for promotions, but no one ever has a conversation with that individual first to ask them, 'What do you want to do? What are your ambitions? What do you see as your goals or your next steps?' Or, 'Do you want that job?' So often we miss that critical piece and then we wonder why, when we elevate someone, they might not do as well as we expected in their new role. We need to get better at having those individual conversations."

That conversation should start with a reality check on what leadership roles entail. After all, many people think they want big leadership jobs until they actually start doing them, when they discover all the challenges that they wished they had known about before they raised their hand. And leadership has become many times harder since 2020, the year the global pandemic started and George Floyd was murdered, setting off tsunamis of wholesale change across society and the corporate landscape.

The pandemic accelerated digital transformation at light speed, upended old notions about whether people could work productively at home and made humanity, compassion,



vulnerability and authenticity—not to mention an ability to thrive in the ambiguity of relentless disruption—the qualities that separate leaders. Heightened awareness of racial injustice has led to pressure on organizations to make bolder commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. As huge swaths of the population shifted to working from home, we spent more time contemplating the meaning and purpose of our work, which led not only to the Great Resignation but also to a growing sense among employees that they should have a voice, if not a vote, in setting company policies.

Leaders now must prep for all-hands meetings as if they were politicians, ready to field questions on just about any pressing issue facing society. When, where and how should you take a stand on various issues? What do you do if someone asks you to set aside the corporate talking points and share your personal belief? In this era of stakeholder capitalism, leaders must work through difficult conversations with many more constituents, who often have competing demands.

Younger generations of workers are rewriting the employer-employee contract by asking not what they can do for their companies, but what their companies can do for them. They want to work to live, rather than following the live-to-work ethos of previous generations—a big part of the #quietquitting movement—but they also want their companies to be more reflective of their personal values.

The Expanding Role of Leaders

“It’s a new world across the board,” said Ryan Roslansky, who took over as chief executive of LinkedIn three months into the pandemic. “Everyone is hungry for corporate executives to show up on every critical issue in the world.”

If that’s the job description for leaders today, what is your gut check as you read that list of new challenges? Do they strike you as a set of endless headaches and make you run for the exits? Or do you see them as fascinating challenges and

an opportunity to build new models of leadership at a time of breathtaking change?

If you are nodding your head “yes” in response to that last question, and you feel inspired to take on the many challenges of leadership, then let’s proceed to the question of “why.” Can you step outside yourself and interrogate your desire to lead? Is it to make more money and enjoy the bragging rights that come with a bigger title? Do you want power? If the answer to those questions is “yes,” then you should pause and consider the hard-earned lessons of many executives. The money will not feel like it’s enough to offset the sacrifices you will have to make in these top leadership roles. And you will be flying into a stiff headwind if your goal is to wield power, because command-and-control leadership has fallen out of favor.

So, what does drive people to lead and to choose the harder paths in life that mean longer hours, tougher problems and greater exposure to risk and failure?

It is one of the many questions I have tried to answer through my conversations with leaders. One of the most common threads that comes up is the quality of being “drawn to the fire.” Rather than wanting to avoid hard challenges, they are excited by them, and they see them more as opportunities than problems, more energizing than draining.

“If somebody isn’t interested in leading during a period like this and hopefully learning from it, then they probably aren’t the right person for the job,” said Anne Mulcahy, the former CEO of Xerox, who now serves on many boards, including as lead director of Johnson & Johnson. “The exciting part is that you can define the role and shape it, perhaps much more so than in the past. And I find that tremendously exciting for leaders who have an appetite for that.”

Does that describe you? Not every moment of every day, of course, but most of the time? The point is to be honest with yourself and clear about why you want to lead, because that “why” will sustain you through the most difficult moments when you may wonder why you signed up for all these challenges in the first place.

It’s okay to have doubts. Leadership is not binary. It is not a question of whether or not you are a leader, and some leadership roles may appeal to you more than others. Because of the circumstances of your life, you might be more or less inclined to take on a bigger role during different phases of your career.

Leadership is complicated, so you should not be surprised to have a complicated relationship with leadership. So it’s important to be honest with yourself about why you want to lead. Because those qualities that are becoming increasingly important in leaders today mean you must check your ego at the door and be self-aware of your goals and motivations. We are in an era when it seems like any question is fair game for employees to ask of their leaders. So, imagine if you were on a stage in a town-hall meeting, and someone raised their hand and asked, “Why do you want to lead?” What would you say? ■■



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