

SUMMARY

TRUE NORTH

BILL GEORGE



Summary of “True North” by Bill George

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Discover your Authentic Leadership

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Introduction

Discovering your *True North* takes a lifetime of commitment and learning. As GE's Jeff Immelt states, "Leadership is one of those great journeys into your soul. It's not like anyone can tell you how to do it." After interviewing over a hundred great leaders, like Jeff Immelt, Bill George has discovered that the hardest person you will ever lead is *yourself*. When you can finally lead yourself through life's many challenges and difficulties, you will find that leading others becomes pretty straight-forward. In fact, there are six principal areas required to lead yourself.

- Gaining self-awareness
- Practicing your values and principles under pressure
- Balancing your extrinsic and intrinsic motivation
- Building your support team
- Staying grounded by integrating your life
- Understanding the passion and purpose of your leadership

While gaining self-awareness is a life-long journey, you can accelerate the process by receiving honest feedback from others. For instance, in his mid-30s Doug Baker Jr. was a rising star at Ecolab. Finding such success at a young age caused him to become arrogant and self-centered; however, when some subordinates gave him some tough feedback, he went through a "cathartic experience." One in which he felt like someone shined a mirror on him and showed him the ugly truth. From that point on, Baker went through some soul-searching and his self-awareness was one of the key factors that led to his success as CEO just nine years later. In other words, Doug Baker Jr. learned how to follow his *True North* and gaining self-awareness was just the beginning. Lucky for you, finding authentic leadership and your *True North* can begin at any age, you are never too young or too old to begin learning. So if you're ready to find yours, keep reading to learn from authentic leaders about how they developed their skills and learn how to create your own development plan to become an

authentic leader. The bottom line is: *you can discover your authentic leadership right now.*

Your Life Story Guides Your Motivation

When looking at leaders around you, what stands out about them? Is it their passion? Their motivation? Perhaps you believe these leaders have an innate ability to make the right decisions and get people to like them. This belief couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, there is no such thing as an instant leader. Instead, becoming a leader is a journey that will take you through the peaks and valleys of life as you encounter many trials and tribulations. Maintaining your authenticity during these times will be the greatest challenge you will ever face. So how do leaders do it?

They begin by asking themselves, "What is my life story?" When you ask yourself this question, you can begin to dig deep into understanding and framing your story. Eventually, you will find the calling to lead authentically and remain faithful to your *True North*. In other words, leaders are genuine people who are motivated to serve others and ensure that they live up to their full potential. For instance, take a look at the founder of Starbucks, Howard Schultz, who used his life story to define his leadership.

At just seven-years-old, Schultz and his family were living in the federally subsidized Bayview Housing Projects in Brooklyn, New York. During that time, his dad was working as a delivery driver and slipped on a sheet of ice and broke his ankle. As a result, his father lost his job and all of the family's healthcare benefits. At the time, workers' compensation didn't exist yet, and his mother couldn't go back to work because she was seven months pregnant. The family had nothing, so they relied on borrowing money and avoided bill collectors.

Seeing his parents struggle, Schultz vowed he would do things differently if he ever had the chance. Little did he know that he would be responsible for 140,000 employees working in eleven thousand stores worldwide. His experience as a child led Schultz to make Starbucks the first American company to provide access to health coverage for part-time employees who

work as few as twenty hours per week. Schultz credits his life story with giving him the motivation to create one of the most successful businesses in the last twenty-five years. At the end of the day, authentic leaders aren't concerned with money and success; instead, they feel the need to help others and use their own experiences to guide their choices.

Losing Sight of Your *True North* Leads to Detrimental Problems

Unfortunately, many leaders begin to lose themselves during their leadership journey. They lose sight of their *True North* and end up getting derailed. So what causes so many leaders to lose their way? Why do people with excellent potential get derailed as soon as they hit the peak of success? The problem is not that these people are bad leaders; in fact, they have the potential to be good leaders, even great leaders! But somewhere along the way, they get pulled off course as they get caught up in their own success. In observing some leaders who have derailed, George identified five types of leaders who lost sight of their *True North*.

The first archetype is the *imposter*. Imposters rise the ranks through cunning and aggression. They understand the politics of getting ahead and don't let anything stand in their way. They have little self-reflection or self-awareness, and once they find their source of power, they don't care how they are perceived by others. The second is the *rationalizer*. Rationalizers seem as if they are on top of the pressing issues of the company; however, when things don't go their way, they rarely take responsibility. They also care most about producing numbers, so to do so, they make rash, short-term decisions that have long-term consequences.

The third archetype is the *glory seeker*. Glory seekers are just as the name suggests: obsessed with money, fame, glory, and power. They believe the outward signs of success are the most important and often feel jealous of others with more money, accolades, and power. Inside, they usually feel empty. Next is the *loner*. The loners' major flaw is failing to form close relationships and seeking out mentors or support networks. They believe they can and must make it on their own. Without a support network, loners are more likely to make mistakes.

The final archetypal leader is the *shooting star*. Shooting stars center their lives entirely on their careers. Their major flaw is their failure to make time

for meaningful relationships like family, friendships, communities, and even themselves. As they run faster towards their goals, they sacrifice sleep, exercise, and basic needs to stay happy both physically and mentally. Oftentimes, they move up so quickly that they rarely have time to reflect and learn from their mistakes. Once they've risen to the top, however, they are prone to making irrational decisions.

A recent example of a high-profile leader who lost sight of his *True North* is that of Philip Purcell, the former CEO of Morgan Stanley. Throughout his career, Purcell was a rising star and found himself leading the merger of Dean Witter with Morgan Stanley, which ultimately led to his position as CEO. His main challenge as CEO was to create a financial services powerhouse by integrating the investment bank with the brokerage business; however, he went about this endeavor the completely wrong way. Instead of spending time with the managers, traders, and new customers, he focused on building his power base by manipulating the board and pushing out anyone who challenged his leadership. Frustration with his leadership began to grow, eventually leading to many former Morgan Stanley executives lobbying the board for Purcell's removal.

In the end, Purcell was forced to resign and he retired comfortably to his Utah ranch. The point is that any leader can lose their way. Luckily, you can find yourself and get back on track by understanding that leadership is about *empowering others*.

Shifting Your Thinking From “I” to “We”

As leaders begin to climb the ranks of organizations, they mistakenly believe that others will follow them simply because they are placed in a leadership position. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Leadership is not simply about getting others to follow us or do our bidding; instead, it's about motivating others to empower themselves and reach their full potential. Therefore, if you want to become an authentic leader, you must shift your thinking from “I” to “We.” In fact, this is the most important transformation that any leader can go through. How else can they unleash the power of their organizations unless they motivate people to reach their full potential?

Leaders go through this transformation in many ways. For Oprah Winfrey, it took a triggering experience for her to realize the essential purpose of her leadership. At thirty-six-years-old, Oprah was interviewing a woman on her show named Trudy Chase who had been sexually abused as a child. Mid-interview, Oprah was overcome with emotion as traumatic memories from her own childhood began flooding her head. After her pivotal interview with Chase, Oprah realized her broader mission. You see, her entire life Oprah struggled with being able to say *no*, she felt the need to please people. That day, she finally understood why and she recognized her mission went far beyond pursuing personal success; instead, she felt the need to empower people all over the world, especially young women.

Oprah's story illustrates one of the many kinds of transformative events that most authentic leaders experience. Life will always be full of difficulties, it's not always fair. But it is during these hard times that authentic leaders realize their true purposes and realize their greater calling. We see a similar experience through Mike Sweeney, the CEO of the private equity firm Goldner Hawn. At just twenty-eight-years-old, Sweeney discovered that he had testicular cancer. It was at that moment that he realized he was not immortal. He describes waking up in the morning, unable to get off the couch as a wave of depression hit him. He realized,

“Holy cow, I could die. At that age, the thought of death never occurs to you.”

The experience, however, changed the way Sweeney thought and allowed him to understand himself better and rethink his life and career. Sweeney began asking himself what was important to him in his business and his life. He realized he wanted to create and build businesses where everyone involved did as well as he did. “When you face your own mortality, as Mike Sweeney did, your priorities and your *True North* become crystal clear. The same is true when someone close to you passes away.” In the end, every leader must go through a transformative experience in which they begin to shift their focus from “I” to “We.”

Becoming Self-Aware is Crucial for Any Leader

The advice to “know thyself” is thousands of years old. Even Shakespeare once wrote, “To thine own self be true.” But knowing yourself is far more complicated than it seems. That’s because we are complex human beings, constantly evolving and adapting to our environment - all in an attempt to find our unique place in the world. Therefore, gaining self-awareness is central to becoming authentic leaders and is the center of your compass. In other words, you must know your passions and motivations to find your purpose of leadership.

CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters, Judy Vredenburg, confirmed the importance of self-awareness when she stated, “Having self-awareness early in life is very important. You need to understand the cultures you thrive in, the roles you are best in, your natural strengths, and your natural interests. Then put yourself in a place where you can shine.” Additionally, self-awareness is important for a variety of reasons, including increasing your self-confidence. You see, when leaders know themselves, they can become more comfortable in their own skin. Adobe CEO Bruce Chizen felt insecure working in the tech industry because he was not an engineer but soon recognized his strong business and product-marketing skills and his ability to learn about engineering. After that, Chizen understood himself and becoming self-aware allowed him to find real self-confidence that propelled him into a CEO position.

Self-awareness also has the power to help you build strong relationships. For instance, Debra Dunn the former senior vice president at HP states, “If someone is self-aware, you can have a more authentic interaction with them.” That’s because those who are comfortable with themselves tend to be more open and transparent, including sharing their vulnerabilities which strengthens bonds and relationships. Lastly, self-awareness can help leaders fill the skill gaps with colleagues that complement them. For example, Agilent’s former CEO Ned Barnholdt said, “You understand your

strengths and shortcomings and try to build a strong team around you. I didn't grow up as an accountant so I surround myself with excellent financial people. That's a lot better than trying to be somebody you're not."

So what happens when great leaders lack self-awareness? Well, let's take a look at Dave Pottruck, the former CEO of Charles Schwab. While he was an incredibly hard worker, he simply couldn't understand why his new colleagues resented his long hours and aggressiveness in pushing for results. He motivated his colleagues like he did his former teammates, unfortunately, the skills didn't transfer over as easily. He didn't understand that his level of energy was intimidating and offended others. In his mind, he was trying to help the company, but in the eyes of his peers, he was self-serving. It was when his boss gave him a low rating on trustworthiness and told him, "Dave, your colleagues do not trust you," that Pottruck knew he needed to make a change.

While in denial at first, Pottruck worked with a coach who taught him about authenticity and the power of storytelling. In his speeches, he began to tell stories that revealed his vulnerabilities, like his fears, ambitions, and failures. Then, he got divorced for a second time. The experience allowed him to shine a light on his blind spots and realized that he needed to take responsibility for his faults and shortcomings. Today, Pottruck is happily remarried and his hard work in becoming self-aware paid off. In addition to winning the support of his colleagues, his dynamic leadership produced incredible results for the firm.

Set Your Leadership Principles and Ethical Boundaries

While the center of your compass focuses on self-awareness, you must also understand your values and the principles that guide your leadership. Novartis's Dan Vasella once stated, "Most people have some kind of moral compass that tells them in which direction to go." Similarly, former Johnson & Johnson chairman and CEO Jim Burke, who decided to recall Tylenol in 1982, said, "Without a moral center, you will swim in chaos." To define your values, you must ask yourself, "What is most important in your life?" Perhaps it's maintaining integrity, making a difference, helping other people, or devoting yourself to your family. It's important to realize that your values may look different from someone else's, so it's up to you to decide where your values lie.

Once you can clearly understand your values, you can then begin to establish the principles by which you intend to lead. These are called your *leadership principles*. "They are like navigational instruments sailors use to get their bearings at sea, as they fix the direction of their travel with respect to the north. Principles enable leaders to prioritize their values and demonstrate which ones trump others." Once you define your leadership principles, it's time to understand your *ethical boundaries*. Where do you draw the line between acceptable actions and those that are not?

For example, David Gergen became the first person to serve as White House advisor to four U.S. presidents: Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. Gergen's goal was to lead a life that was consistent with the values passed on to him by his family. However, after Nixon's reelection in 1972, Gergen was named the head of the president's speechwriting and research team where he supervised fifty other people. He admits the position led to a feeling of importance and arrogance that many people in the administration had. So when stories about the Watergate cover-up began to emerge, Gergen refused to believe the allegations. Throughout the scandal, many staff members began to resign but Gergen

didn't feel he could leave. He stated, "My resignation would have made a public statement about my lack of belief in President Nixon's integrity."

Even after finding out about Nixon's guilt, Gergen still couldn't leave and as Nixon left the White House for the last time, Gergen believed his career in public life was over. The experience made Gergen realize that he valued transparency. He also recognized that he had been untrue to himself as he was drunk with power, glamour, and prestige. He knew he needed to return to his authentic roots, which allowed him to be a highly-regarded advisor to Presidents Ford, Reagan, and Clinton. He even went on to become the director of Harvard's Center for Public Leadership, allowing him to teach leadership to some of the greatest leaders of our time.

Once you've discovered your values, it's time to set ethical boundaries. This simply means that you need to set clear limits on what you will do when you are tempted, under pressure, or when you need guidance for making decisions. Setting clear boundaries early allows your moral compass to kick in and tell you when it's time to take a step back, even if that means making a significant personal sacrifice. One way leaders establish their ethical boundaries is by using the *New York Times* test. Before taking action, ask yourself, "How would I feel if this entire situation, including transcripts of our discussions, was printed on the front page of the *New York Times*?" If your answer is negative, then it's time to rethink your actions. On the other hand, if they are positive, then you should feel comfortable moving forward, even if others criticize your decisions.

Identifying Your Intrinsic Motivation

To be an authentic leader, one of the most crucial qualities is motivation. As you know, however, motivation can be incredibly hard to find and even harder to maintain. How often do you become motivated to go to the gym only to lose that motivation just a few weeks later? Therefore, authentic leaders must understand exactly what motivates them. There are two types of motivations: *extrinsic and intrinsic*. Extrinsic motivations are those measured by the external world, like getting good grades, winning athletic competitions, or making money.

On the other hand, intrinsic motivations are those derived from your sense of the meaning of your life - your *True North*. For instance, these are the motivations involving personal growth, like helping other people develop, taking on social causes, and making a difference in the world.

Unfortunately, many people never tap into these powerful motivations. In today's society, many people are too focused on material gain, temptations, and social pressures that cause them to seek money and wealth over doing what motivates them intrinsically. Authentic leaders must learn how to avoid this trap.

It's easy today to fall into the trap of taking the highest paying job right out of college. College graduates are drowning in student loans and believe that taking a high-paying job will allow them to get on their feet until they do something else they love. Unfortunately, this thinking causes them to fall into the trap as they grow accustomed to a certain style of living. In fact, the leaders who turned down higher-paying jobs early in their careers came out ahead in the end - in both satisfaction and compensation. Anne Moore, for example, had a dozen job offers after business school and she took the lowest paying one at Time Inc. Today, she is now the CEO.

So how can you discover your intrinsic motivation? Well, discovering what motivates you can come from surprising sources. Bob Fisher, for example, is now the chairman of Gap, Inc. In his mid-twenties, however, he was

feeling increasingly stressed at work and needed a new focus. His roommate then convinced him to go on a fly-fishing weekend. Immediately, Fisher fell in love with the sport and found a passion for the outdoors. One day, as he fished in the North Fork of the Feather River, Fisher stumbled upon the remains of rusted gold mining equipment. As he looked at the tranquil river, he recognized that mining equipment was everywhere - it was a mess. This experience changed his life as it introduced him to the many environmental problems in the world.

As a result, Fisher made it his mission to look at what Gap could do to recycle. Under Fisher's leadership, Gap's efforts grew into a highly admired initiative that spurred from Fisher's intrinsic motivation of helping the environment.

Build Your Support Team

At the very base of your compass, you have your support team. Members of your team help you stay focused on your *True North* while keeping you grounded in reality and providing the support you need as you navigate your leadership journey. In fact, all leaders know they don't succeed on their own; therefore, authentic leaders build support teams that they can confide in during times of need and celebrate with them in times of success.

A strong support team begins with having just one person in your life who you can be completely vulnerable and open with. Just one person who will accept you for your flaws and can be the one to tell you the honest truth. For many leaders, this person is their spouse, although for others this bond might be with other family members, a close friend, or a trusted mentor. Many authentic leaders have a mentor to help them become better authentic leaders by helping them develop the necessary skills. But the most important thing to remember about relationships with mentors is that the relationship must *flow both ways*.

In other words, you and your mentor should be learning from one another, exploring similar values, and sharing enjoyment together. So if you're simply entering a relationship with a mentor expecting to take all that he or she will give, then your relationship will not last for long. "It is the two-way nature of the connection that sustains it." The current chairman and former CEO of Intuit, Bill Campbell, is the dean of mentoring in Silicon Valley. In fact, many venture capitalists and board members will not hire a new CEO without first checking with Campbell. His reputation has led to the nickname, "Coach Campbell" and he is one of Silicon Valley's most respected executives.

The reason Campbell has become such a trusted mentor is because of his selfless spirit and his interdependent relationship with his mentees. Mentees like Bruce Chizen, Donna Dubinsky, and Randy Komisar all helped Campbell build Claris, a computer software created in 1987 when

Campbell was an executive at Apple Computer. Meanwhile, Campbell helped each mentee develop their skills as well. Dubinsky states, “Bill taught us how to communicate with employees, how to build a team, and how to operate a company.” Simply put, they relied on one another for support and Campbell empowered all three by revealing his own vulnerabilities and shortcomings.

However, a good mentor isn’t just someone who will support you in every endeavor; instead, a good mentor is someone who will challenge you every step of the way. For example, Dave Dillion was named merchandising vice president for the Fry’s supermarket division at just twenty-nine-years-old. With little experience in merchandising, Dillon was open to learning more and making the team better. One day, Dillon received a call from Chuck Fry, the man who sold Fry’s to Dillions, inviting him to walk through a Fry’s store with him. As they stopped in front of the soda drink display, Fry made a point to challenge Dillon on the display and question its purpose. From that day on, the two spoke every day, and each day, Fry coached Dillon on how to maximize the company’s potential.

Mentors that challenge you rather than just support you understand the hard work it takes in helping you develop the skills you need to be an authentic leader. It’s much easier to simply tell someone he or she is doing a good job. But finding a mentor that can push you to change and improve is the key to a great mentor-mentee relationship.

Living an Integrated Life

As most authentic leaders will tell you, having a healthy work-life balance is key. For authentic leaders, being true to themselves by being the same person at work and home is a constant test. Many people wonder if that is even possible. According to Bill George and many other authentic leaders, it is. By leading an *integrated life*, you can bring together the major elements of your personal and professional life, so that you can be the same person in each environment.

Accomplishing this is one of the greatest challenges that leaders face and it's not always easy. EBay's John Donahoe states, "Sometimes the choices are really hard, and you make a lot of mistakes." One of Donahoe's first major decisions came during his first year at business school. On the eve of finals, his wife Eileen went into labor with their first child. Donahoe had to ask himself which was more important, his child or his grades. The answer was obvious. He recognized that getting straight A's was not the most important part of life at the moment. However, to his surprise, Donahoe earned the highest grades possible that quarter. He realized his relaxation allowed him to thrive, and that experience showed him that life could work with him and be his friend.

A few years later, Donahoe was committed to living an integrated life. So after Eileen graduated from law school, she received an offer clerk for a federal judge. However, the job required her to be at work at 7:30 a.m., meaning Donahoe would be the one to take their two kids to school each day. Determined to support his wife, Donahoe went to the managing director of Bain's San Francisco office and told him he had no choice but to quit. Tom Tierney, the managing director, simply laughed and said, "John, we can find a way to work around this." In the end, Donahoe was reassigned to a local client and was upfront about not being able to meet at any time before 10 a.m. Surprisingly, his client understood and the following years, Donahoe was named head of Bain's San Francisco office.

As the head of the San Francisco office, Donahoe was feeling burnt out, he needed a break. So he decided he needed a three-month sabbatical and took his family to Europe where they spent each week in a new area. Upon return, he was re-energized, and a year later, he was named worldwide managing director. At the end of the day, Donahoe succeeded in creating a balance between his home and work life and made the necessary sacrifices to be a better person at work and home. An integrated life has allowed Donahoe to be a more effective leader and be a more devoted husband and father. In the end, “Their family serves as an excellent example of not only how to be intentional in building meaningful lives but how rewarding it can be.”

Final Summary

Leaders all over the world aim to be an authentic leader. Of course, not every leader can achieve this; however, those who follow their True North and let their inner compass guide their decisions find the most success as a leader. When you explore your true character and your true passions and motivations, you can begin to make decisions that are better for you, your work, and your family. By becoming an authentic leader, you develop an internal compass that will always point you in the right direction.



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