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Commitment

As an acorn takes root, or a field flourishes in the Spring, they grew in their commitments bit by bit.

—Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1997, p. 196)

Committed

There is a difference between deciding and making a commitment to one's vocational calling. As a pilot friend once observed, you might rather easily discover an interest in flying an airplane. It is taking off on a solo flight for the first time, however, that turns a decision to fly into a commitment to fly and land a plane safely.

So it was with the commitment of exemplary leaders. They didn't just decide one day to devote their selves to a particular purpose. Something happened that turned initial interests into life-defining commitments. From core values and an aligned sense of calling, they grew into a deeper emotional and intellectual embrace of purpose and associated action. Such commitment was spurred by an evolving belief that they could have a meaningful impact on what they valued most in life. It was commitment that was nurtured, first and foremost, by a growing sense of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is a concept offered by social cognition theorists to explain the perceptions we hold about our ability to perform a given task and effect resulting consequences (Bandura, 1997). A sense of self-efficacy either empowers one to take on a challenge or limits one's ability to do so. Afflicted with a low sense of self-efficacy, you are inclined to either not try or give up easily when confronted with a challenging task. Indeed, you might surmise that effort will be somehow lacking and results limited. Imbued with a high sense of self-efficacy, on the other hand, you are more eager to accept and act on challenging assignments. You would feel capable of handling the task and simultaneously anticipate a positive result.

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Notably, the 36 interviewed leaders all conveyed a strong positive sense of self-efficacy. They were confident about their leadership capacity for favorably influencing the achievement of important results. They were also aware that such confidence grew from support and experience as they initially sought to achieve results and realize an impact within their chosen vocational callings.

COMMITTED THROUGH CONFIDENCE

The interviewed leaders were nudged toward leadership commitments by the reinforcing encouragement and feedback they received from valued mentors and advisors. Such feedback reached back to early childhood and continued to progress as the journey to leadership evolved.

"I initially didn't start as a leader, but as part of a team. Often I would come up with an idea that was a little different and they would let me lead. Success built upon success."

—*CJ Nickerson*

Such feedback reached back to early childhood and continued to progress as the journey to leadership evolved.

Beth Stevenson spoke of the effect her mother's words had on her feeling of empowerment as a child and later as an adult.

My mother would tell me very explicitly how I needed to look at myself to change the situation. I remember being in sixth grade and

crying that I had no friends. My mother's response was, "What are you doing about it, what could you change?" It made me feel as though I had power over the situation. Today, I never lose sight of what I am trying to accomplish. I try to be centered, because there are always so many distractions. Creating a good process is critical in order to allow for ambiguity but keep the focus so that things keep moving. I work hard on figuring out what tools are necessary to work through the process.

For other leaders, confidence-building reinforcement came from the workplace. Mandy Macleod recalled a superintendent who showed faith in her and the reinforcing results that occurred.

She offered me the job of principal for one year with the option to go back into the classroom. I got great satisfaction from seeing the progression of the students and the satisfaction of the parents.

Jeanne Dukes credited an early mentor with turning her self-confidence around. Jeanne had experienced a dominating father whose word was the law. It took her years of trial and error to start to believe in her own voice.

My boss got me involved in state politics . . . to argue for what's in the best interests of these kids. He encouraged me to go back to school and he sponsored me in an administrator [preparation] program.

Such opportunities to experience leadership with reinforcing feedback about efforts fostered growth. Many of the interviewed leaders experienced supervisors who took time to talk to them about leadership. Such counsel not only helped the novice leaders formulate their life goals, but also helped them to begin to understand the impact they might be able to realize. CJ Nickerson shared one such simple, but important, encounter in his life—one that caused him to begin to think more for himself. “One of my professors in my master’s program kept telling me, ‘This is okay for a textbook answer, but I want to know what you think.’”

COMMITTED THROUGH CONSEQUENCE

Advice and feedback from respected sources nurtured the leaders’ expectations for success in their chosen field. They were also motivated by early tastes of the satisfaction that comes from impacting a calling of value to them. Ross Gilbert recalled an experience he had in college that brought an awareness of the result of his efforts.

“It’s not just about words, or espoused values, it’s about action and results.”

—Boon Yoon Chiang

When I was at teachers’ college, I used to go to youth camp and I’d be the one directing the circuit games, a very complex organization. I’d be the one they’d put in charge of that sort of activity. I wanted to make sure that things were done right. It was important to me that everyone remained active. It gave me satisfaction to see that this happened.

CJ Nickerson spoke of similar satisfaction that he received from seeing the impact of his work.

I really get a charge out of getting the job done. When I can conceptualize a way to meet a need that was important to make things better for people, I’m happy.

An early experience sewed the seeds of confidence in Ulice Payne, paving the way for later confidence as a leader.

I was asked to be on a televised Junior High quiz program. Our team went to the finals four times. That was big. You had to be expert in something and your team counted on you I felt responsibility for my school, my teachers, and my town. There was a sense of leading the train and showing that this little steel town can be good.

The development of self-efficacy as a leader was a longer road to hoe for many of the women interviewed. Helen Clark and Nola Hambleton indicated

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the need to be “twice as good” as a man to be taken seriously in their field of calling. Margo Dévai, head of a health education agency in Hungary, mentioned, somewhat bitterly, that it took her 25 years to be recognized for her worth. Even though she developed a strong self-concept from her family, she turned down leadership roles, never saw herself as a leader, and never had a female role model for how to balance leadership with family. Eventually, though, she recognized her own self-worth, as did others.

There was no doubt that what I did was good. I was involved in different institutes, universities, and conferences and my colleagues saw it. . . . Finally, I was confident in my work. Then . . . I started to honor myself.

Similarly, Christine Rodriguez had to build her self-confidence over time. As a woman and person of color, she learned that she had to market herself and bring to light her skills and attributes.

I can't tell you how many meetings there were where I would sit there and was afraid that what would come out of my mouth would be considered dumb or uninformed. Often I was thinking what the next person verbalized. As I gained confidence, I learned that my opinions counted and that I could add value to whatever was going on.

Whether through reinforcement from others or from the experience of a job well done, the 36 leaders were emotionally and intellectually turned on early and often by the effect—and potential—of their influence. Sooner for some, but eventually for all, a transforming perception of “self as leader” began to transpire. They began to recognize an alignment between their values and calling and the consequences of their behavior. Such awareness fueled conscious commitment to making a difference in their vocational field. Most important, it opened their minds to assuming leadership roles as the means to manifest core values within vocational callings.

Compelled

Having described a formative experience that progressed from the shaping of core values to reinforcing callings and deepening commitments, the leadership formation story now addresses why and how the mantle of leadership was assumed. Again, the leaders' interview reflections to this point suggest that none set out to become a leader. They did describe early interest in the fields that they were passionate about, whether it was education, law, medicine, science, government, journalism, art, or some other worthy endeavor. They wanted to make a difference, to improve the world and serve others, to be the

best teacher, violinist, or other form of contributing citizen they could be. For all of that, however, they did not initially see themselves as leaders.

Interestingly, as the 36 reflections about leadership formation unfolded, early markers of leadership disposition were revealed. And, inevitably, commitments were made and roles assumed as the leaders sought to achieve goals aligned to core values. In other words, the 36 leaders were compelled to assume leadership roles. They were driven to such roles as the means to actualize their values and manifest their commitments.

COMPELLED BY PREDISPOSITION

If you are a leader, you probably identify with the predisposition to “figure it out.” Many of the interviewed leaders recalled early experiences with the ability to “see” how things should go or come up with unique ideas. In addition to seeing things that were not so obvious to others, they described incidences of their ability to influence others and direct events early in life. Rod Chamberlain noted demonstrations of such proclivity in his childhood.

“I always could see things that seemed self-evident to me, but not to others.”

—*Jeanne Dukes*

I came from a church tradition where cards weren’t allowed but ROOK was because it wasn’t associated with gambling. In all the games we held a debriefing . . . how did someone win and what was the strategy. To this day it drives my wife crazy. . . . She says, “Just play the game. You don’t have to dissect it.” But it is built into me after all these years. . . . I’m constantly thinking about how things could work better.

CJ Nickerson described his ability to “see it” and the effect such insight had on his colleagues.

I could conceptualize a way to meet a need that I thought was important to make things better for people. Early in my professional days others wouldn’t see it, but they trusted me and so would go along with it. They would say, “We really didn’t get it, but we know you got it and so we were willing to go along.” I didn’t see myself as a leader, but really part of a team. They knew that I would work hard and that my word was my bond. That led to acceptance.

In addition to the ability to figure it out, many of the leaders cited an early need to voice their opinions and stretch their sphere of influence. Helen Clark, while instilled with sound beliefs from her family, found that even at an early age she was able to argue her liberal viewpoint with her conservative father about how those beliefs should be lived out in practice. “I have always had a clear sense of what was right and wrong and what was fair and just.”

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Rich Teerlink talked about his early leadership effect on friends. Like Helen, he recognized his tendency to know his mind and let others know it as well.

In high school, I was head of a HI-Y club. I was elected to be the president. I really don't know why; they must have seen something in me. When I was growing up, people would joke about Teerlink's rules. I wasn't bashful about saying this is right and this is wrong.

Both Julianne Lowe and Beth Stevenson felt dissatisfied within their family structures if they weren't taking some sort of leadership role when they felt the need presented itself. "When I see the need for an improvement to make, I voice it. I just found myself figuring out what we should do [and] then taking charge."

Beth surmised that birth order might have been a factor affecting her early disposition toward the exercise of leadership behavior.

I was an oldest child, so I am always the person who is most comfortable making decisions or throwing out the first idea. Later in college I was drawn to personal service that required judgment. I would think about how to frame the activity to make sure it was good for everybody. I was good at troubleshooting.

Curiosity and collaboration were additional leadership qualities that were evident within many of the leaders at an early age. Denese Henare noted such qualities in her personal experience.

I was always a curious child, very inquisitive. In school I was the consensus finder, looking for win/win. I learned from the Maori style of debate, which could go on all day and all night until everyone is heard and all views are tested.

Patrick Sayne shared his early and lasting understanding of the relationship between management and leadership as he reflected on his own ability to envision an idea and see it to fruition.

A leader, in the inception, thinks [he or she] has a better idea and wants to get it going . . . but someone [also] has to organize. My former wife used to say that if I saw a basket of puppies, I would want to sort and categorize them. Who knows what causes that. I think you can make a pretty good manager with no desire to be a leader, but I don't think you can make a leader out of someone who ultimately doesn't want to be one. I think a manager is someone who provides organization and direction, but a leader provides a vision.

Though the leaders didn't initially aspire to leadership, they described early capacity for it. Such capacity was often informally exercised during their youth. It was capacity lying in wait for circumstances to necessitate its full maturation.

COMPELLED BY NEED AND OPPORTUNITY

Given early evidence of leadership tendencies, the 36 leaders nevertheless maintained a youthful ambivalence about formal leadership roles. There was need for additional motivation, some culminating pressure that would propel them beyond a vocational commitment to a leadership commitment within that vocation. As it happened, such motivation commonly arose from encounters with barriers within systems, barriers that were blocking the fulfillment of the leaders' vocational callings.

Frustration with a system as it existed—either its structure or policies or both—was what most frequently pushed the interviewed leaders forward to leadership. Their recognition of a leadership void or ineffective leadership behavior is what most often precipitated their stepping up to leadership responsibilities.

Bucking a system that was perceived to be unfair characterized the coming of age of some leaders. Early in his career, Michael Barber supported a boycott of state testing, organized by the union he worked for, because he perceived the implementation of the test as very poor. From that entry to leadership, he promoted change and improvement through writing and academia, which led to a position of influence within Tony Blair's Labor Party.

When Labor won after all of those years, there was lots to learn from watching the previous performance . . . what was good, what was bad, how to do it. We applied that in a new philosophy of implementation.

Helen Clark took a more deliberate reform path, working in politics 25 years before reaching the pinnacle of her country's leadership as prime minister. The daughter of a Conservative Nationalist, Helen became a left-wing activist in order to promote her perception of a better system based on the core values of fairness, opportunity, and security. "I want to build a society where everyone has the opportunity to fulfill their talents . . . and has access to quality education to do so."

Ian Fox was mindful of his Presbyterian grandfather's admonition that a job worth doing is a job worth doing well. He also loved the challenge and excitement of meaningful work done well. In his early teaching career, he found that he had to step up to leadership positions to insure that decisions were student centered. He couldn't resist the opportunity to take the lead when it led to decisions that were better for his students.

"I always rejected being a bureaucrat. I went over to the CEU as director of the newly established human rights program. There was no human rights education effort before this program."

—Gabor Halmai

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There was an advisor who'd come around to small schools to suggest certain things, like timetables. I could never find one that suited me. In the end, I had to develop my own. I always had to be assured that the students were getting the best opportunities that I could possibly provide. I wasn't prepared to compromise for the sake of expedience.

A leadership vacuum can be a blessing or a curse. For the 36 leaders, such voids were often opportunities. Rod Chamberlain described his unanticipated opportunity to step into the breach.

I was fortunate or unfortunate enough to end up in a situation where there was a lack of leadership. I was a [K-12] teacher and wanted to be a college teacher. . . . When I told my academic dean that I was looking at a college position, he offered me the role of curriculum director. I was totally surprised.

Many of the interviewed leaders spoke of the motivation to assume leadership roles coming from a perception that they could do it as well or better than the next person could. In his career as a prosecutor, Richard Bissen didn't go after leadership roles unless he felt better prepared to assume such roles than others.

I usually find that if I am okay with the current leadership, I don't take part or I will help out. But if I get to a certain position in an organization and think I can do it as well as the rest of the people on the list, then I will get involved. I find that pattern in myself. I will go in if I feel that I would regret it if I didn't. When my current position became available, I didn't want to apply until I heard the names of others who were applying.

Observing the mistakes of other leaders encouraged Bob Knight, CFO of Paul Homes, to consider leadership prospects for himself.

I saw a lot of companies fail because they had leaders with unusual personalities. I watched those leaders fail to get respect because their actions spoke so loud that you couldn't hear their words.

Frank Lukasavitz, cofounder of the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, embraced a leadership role out of rebellion against a failing art school that he felt was misdirected in its mission and management.

We were sitting round and someone said, "Let's start a new school." Someone else said, "You can't just start a school," and I said, "Why not?" We shook hands and each kicked in 100 bucks. I was head of the committee to find a facility and seek accreditation. We begged and borrowed and built stuff and soon started the school with 32 students . . . all in the same year.

The 36 leaders all acknowledged a need or opportunity that compelled them to say yes to leadership. Kuami Pianim, CEO of New World Investments Ltd in Ghana, observed that this might be a bit serendipitous.

I think sometimes leadership just drops on people. You happen to be the person in the right place at a historically defining moment, and then you either take up the mantle or you do not.

The 36 interview reflections suggest, however, that leadership opportunity was more than happenstance. Such opportunity was more likely to be seized by those who were committed to a purpose and, thereby, compelled to assume leadership responsibilities.

Lessons Learned

The reflections of 36 exemplary leaders described a formation path that progressed beyond values and calling to leadership commitment. Notably, the leaders' movement down that path was energized toward progressive self-efficacy by inner coherence about compelling purpose.

"I just wanted to be the best violinist I could become."

—Don Hazelwood

LESSONS ABOUT BECOMING COMMITTED TO LEAD

Through growing awareness that they could exercise a positive impact on goals aligned to their core values, the 36 leaders experienced a seductive pull toward leadership commitments. They became more deeply committed as their *confidence in their ability* to have an impact within their sphere of influence was reinforced by positive feedback from others. The opportunity to test themselves in informal leadership roles nurtured their commitment within their vocational purpose. Observing the *positive consequence of actions* was also a powerful source of reinforcement.

"I was chosen for this path, I didn't choose it."

—Richard Bissen

LESSONS ABOUT BEING COMPELLED TO LEAD

Making a commitment to more formal and prominent leadership roles was ultimately compelled by the leaders' predispositions, as well as the needs and opportunities they encountered within vocational callings. The leaders

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"I've always been a go-getter. I am a bit of a perfectionist I think. As I grew up, through school, everything I went for, I wanted to be the best. I remember very early in my junior year in high school, I joined an extracurricular club which had very senior people, and I became president of the club!"

—Alex Banful

observed an early and *compelling predisposition toward curiosity, creativity, and collaboration* and to "figure it out" when confronted by problems and tasks. Those precursors of leadership potential were often recognized and encouraged by mentors along the formation path. The leaders also felt *compelled to step up and lead when a leadership need or opportunity was apparent*. Leadership vacuums that imperiled organizational success often precipitated their transition to leadership roles.

A LESSON WITHIN THE LESSONS

It was inevitable, for these 36 exemplary leaders, that saying no to leadership was not an option. As they moved down their formation path, they became deeply committed to vocational callings that were rooted in core values, and they were subsequently compelled to assume leadership roles that were aligned with these values. If they wanted to achieve the goals related to their callings, they would have to accept the mantle of leadership.

This description further defines the foundation of a coherent leadership model (see Figure 3.1). That foundation (as initially described in Chapter 2) originates with the shaping of core values and the exploration of vocational calling. It is then expanded and reinforced (as described in this chapter) by commitment to meaningful service within a calling, including the acceptance of leadership roles. This genesis flows from core values that center internal coherence about leadership purpose. Values are initially shaped by context and then progressively reinforced as the individual is called, committed, and compelled to lead. Thus, a dynamic model of coherent leadership continues to unfold. At this point, the evolving model describes the coherency, that is, a logical and consistent relationship of parts, within leadership formation. Chapters 4 through 7 will examine how that coherency is extended through congruent leadership performance.

Further Conversation

This conversation invites your active reflection, at this juncture, to address when, why, and how you resolved leadership commitments along your leadership formation path. The following exercise (which can be done either individually or in the company of colleagues) will facilitate that reflection.

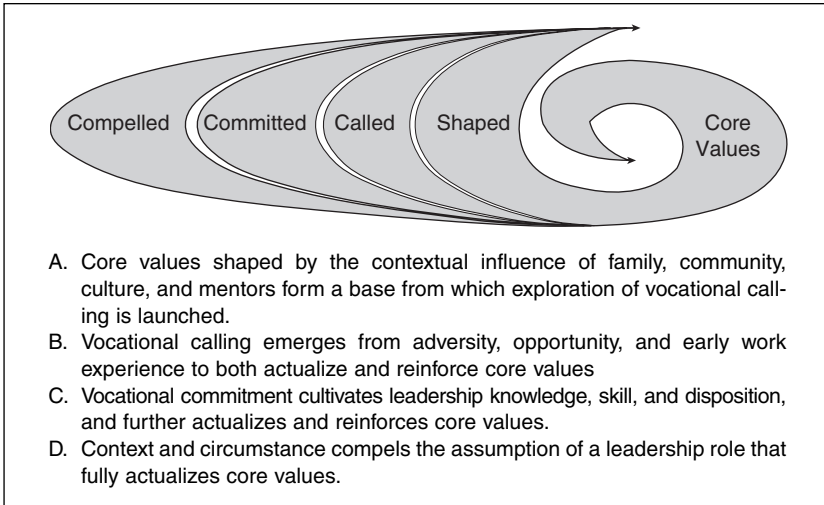


Figure 3.1 A Leadership Formation Dynamic: Core Values are Formed and Actualized

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EXERCISE 3.1 Further Conversation: Leadership Commitment

- A. At what point did your career choice rise to a vocational commitment?
- B. What precipitated that shift?
- C. When and in what fashion did you develop an awareness of your ability to favorably influence the achievement of goals?
- D. How did you come to assume a leadership role in your chosen field?
- E. Why did you find it necessary or desirable to assume that role?