

## Chapter XX

### Developing as a Leader

What does it take to not just be a leader, but *feel* like a leader? Think about the people that surround you in your life, whether at work, in your community or as part of other organizations you are involved in. Who do you identify as leaders? Do you identify yourself as a leader? When you think about who you identify as a leader, what criteria do you use – is it a title or position that someone holds, or is it their actions and character?

Many times, it is easier to identify others as leaders without the use of labels, but more challenging to identify as leaders ourselves, especially if “leader” or “leadership” is not written into our job role or title. But leadership doesn’t require a label. Leadership is about projecting influence over others. A leader is identified by their character, actions and engagement with others, no job title or performance review required. How can you become an influential leader yourself? Start by *shifting your perspective* with these basic steps.



#### ***Put Your Own Mask on First***

If you have taken an airplane, gone through SCUBA lessons, or spent even a few minutes browsing the self-development section of your local bookstore, you have heard some variation of the phrase “put your own mask on before helping others”. It’s a cliché, but it’s cliché for a reason: it’s true and it works. That does not mean that it is easy.

Sometimes putting yourself first can feel selfish. Or it can feel unfamiliar or wrong. It might even feel like you are swimming against the current. Prioritizing yourself by setting boundaries, prioritizing

your time or declining to help can lead to complicated feelings, especially when it goes against expected societal norms, gender roles, or evokes emotional reactions from others. When you are so accustomed to constantly helping others, it can be almost disorienting to prioritize yourself. If any of that rings true for you, there are a few things you can do to help develop this important habit:

1. **Try journaling:** Journaling is an excellent tool used in therapy for emotional regulation. It's also a great tool for self-reflection, unlocking creativity, increasing self-awareness and practicing mindfulness. Writing down your thoughts can help you identify patterns. Are you always saying "yes" to others at work, volunteering to help out on every committee and every project while feeling overwhelmed and unable to enjoy your achievements? Are you exhausting yourself by handling everyone else's emotional baggage, leaving you unable to process your own emotions? Are you prone to catastrophic thinking ("I will either create the best project timeline management has ever seen, or I will fail miserably and have to move into a van down by the river"). With journaling, you can start to identify triggers for your behavior or emotions, or see the patterns you follow. Whatever it is, journaling can help you identify and begin to address those negative triggers and patterns.

Journaling is a powerful way to identify and process emotions as well. The simple act of putting a thought into writing can be a relief of its own. First it acknowledges the thought or emotion: Avoidance really does not work, and can cause much larger problems later on if you continue to ignore important thoughts and emotions. Many times, just the act of writing out a thought or feeling can go a long way to giving you relief. Have you even felt just overwhelmed? Things just seem to pile up and pile up, until you don't even really know what exactly is causing your emotions, you just know that you are absolutely not having a good time? *Try writing it down.* Even something as simple as "I feel mad" or "Feeling sad" can be a start to process those thoughts and feelings.

Second, journaling gives you perspective. I sometimes struggle with the problem of saying no to other people when they ask for my help. I always love helping people out, but I also don't have the time or energy to be the chairperson on every committee, bake six dozen muffins for tomorrow's bake sale, or help every other team at the office at the expense of my own work load. Journaling helps me not only identify the patterns I have about saying "yes" without thinking, but also helps me identify the unrealistic anxiety and fears I have about saying "no". When struggling to decline, I often take a moment to write out my fear, possibly writing something like "I do not have time to bake six dozen muffins, but I am scared that if I do not volunteer to do this, the entire bake sale will be a failure and then the school won't raise needed funds. The kids will miss out on opportunities, their college applications will suffer, they won't be accepted to schools, and it will be my fault they don't achieve all their dreams."

It is highly unlikely that me not baking six dozen muffins will lead to the collapse of my children's future, and writing it out makes me see that I am creating a catastrophic scenario to propel myself into saying yes. Once I recognize that my fear is unreasonable, I can decline the request or even offer an alternative – in this case, I don't have the time or energy to bake muffins, but because assisting in some way is important to me, I can offer to make posters or work a volunteer shift on the day of the bake sale.

Taking the time to identify your thoughts and feelings can help give you perspective. I have a friend who has no problem saying no to people, but falls into an anxiety spiral every time she feels sick thanks to Doctor Google. Her journal entry might look like this: "I think I have an exotic disease because one of the symptoms I currently have is a runny nose, and that is also listed as a symptom for having brain worms". Writing out exactly why she feels anxious gives her the opportunity to acknowledge the feeling while also provides perspective on how unlikely and



2. **Celebrate your wins.** You don't have to have a tickertape parade every time you successfully send an email or survive another meeting, but you should acknowledge the successes you do have *especially* when they relate to you prioritizing your own needs. It's good to be proud of yourself for taking the time for self-care: maybe you made time to go to the gym after work all week long, or you successfully meditated at lunch three times this week. Whatever small or large thing you did, give yourself a pat on the back and let your community know about your success. Not only does this give you a positive jolt of emotions and feedback, it also lets your support team know to check in with you when you aren't celebrating wins so they can support you when you need it. Even more, it sets the example for others that you understand the importance of caring for the whole person, not just the "work life" part of a person.

## Reflection

What are some small ways you can acknowledge and celebrate your wins?



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What are some small ways you can acknowledge and celebrate the wins of others?

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3. **Use the power of positive words.** This kind of mindset also impacts far beyond just selfcare. Too often at work and in our personal lives we focus on the negative aspects, the things that we can improve or the things that went wrong. While it's important to acknowledge mistakes and work through challenges, I would argue it is equally important (perhaps even more important) to acknowledge the positives as well.

During your next routine meeting at work or your next hotwash or debrief, listen closely to what is said and the reaction to it. What kinds of information are being shared, and is that positive or negative? How are people reacting to it? Are people engaged and making suggestions? Are they recognizing the achievements or the missteps of others? Human nature has a natural inclination towards negative bias (Shefrin & Statman, 2003), but that doesn't mean we must be limited by it. Take the time to reframe the situation: instead of starting from a negative (during the project most teams seemed to struggle with communication. How can we prevent this communication gap in the future?), find a positive to start with (during the project, Kim ensured that communication between Teams A and B was clear and consistent. What best practices can we take from this and implement for our other teams to improve their communication?).

This same technique is useful for developing positive self-talk as well. A cornerstone of having a growth mind-set, engaging in positive self-talk can have a monumental impact on the way you see and think about yourself, and how you see and interact with others. And it's not just fuzzy feel-good pop psychology either: a 2020 study showed that personalized positive self-talk had a positive influence on both the mental toughness and finish times of 800 meter runners. (Cooper, Wilson & Jones, 2021) Try some morning positive affirmations for a week, and make a deliberate effort to shift your internal dialog from negative (I've never made a

spreadsheet before, and I am so bad at this) to positive (This is an opportunity to learn and grow. I don't have to be perfect.) – you may be surprised at the changes you see.

# Reflection

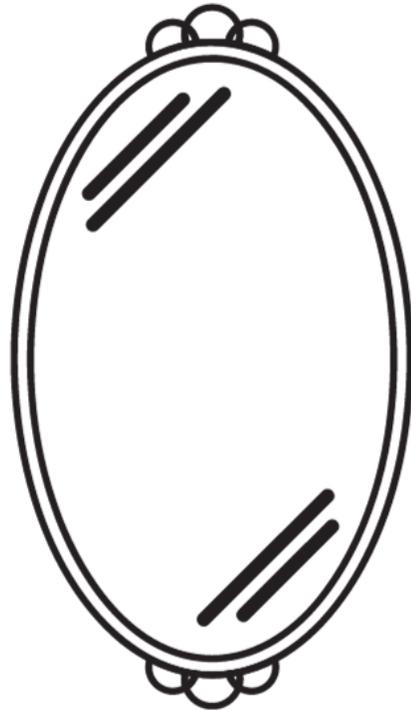


What does your internal voice sound like? What kinds of things do you say to yourself? *Is it overall positive, negative, or neutral (or absent altogether?) How does it make you feel?*

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List a few positive affirmations you can or do say to yourself everyday

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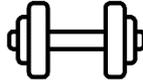


Not all of the tips and suggestions from this section may work for you. And that is okay! However, you won't know what *will* work for you if you don't try it out. It might be uncomfortable, different, or challenging to acknowledge some of these topics, but keep in mind **discomfort is when growth happens**. Challenge yourself to try new things. Remember, it's not selfish to prioritize yourself - it's simply being self-aware and ensuring that you are capable of providing reliable aid to others. So take those first few breaths of fresh air from your own mask, then extend a hand to those around you.

# Reflect

What ways can you ensure that your own mask is in place?





### ***Embrace Your Personal Strengths***

The next step to developing your leadership skills is to discover – and embrace – your personal strengths. While we all have areas that need improvement, it can be a mistake to focus only on correcting or improving our weaknesses. While traditional psychology has emphasized working on negatives or weaknesses (stress, anxiety, fears, etc), positive psychology has really only been distinctly developed in the last couple of decades (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011). Positive psychology studies have shown that even small and simple adjustments in daily life can create better moods and improve overall well-being, leading to a better quality of life (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). This is not a *carte blanche* recommendation to completely ignore or discount your weakness or areas that present challenges: instead, this is about creating balance and synergy in the development of your whole person and not just the parts you are not satisfied with.

Most people have experienced some form of learning from negative experiences: as a child (or for some of us, as an adult), you may have learned the lesson about touching a hot pan when cooking by the negative result of doing so. Research certainly supports this: there are obvious survival advantages to the human tendency to learn from negative emotions and experiences as part of our evolution. However, positive psychology shows that there are advantages to learning from positive experiences *as well as* negative ones. Barbara Frederickson (2001)'s “broaden and build” hypothesis explains how positive emotions can broaden our perspectives and introduce us to new knowledge, experiences, and connections. Recognizing this and applying it to build intellectual and social capital helps us develop more skills and equip us to respond to both unpleasant and positive experiences. So how can you discover your strengths?

First, you must separate the concepts of *strength* and *talent*. For this, we can look to the father of positive psychology, Martin Seligman. Seligman quite literally wrote the book on *Authentic Happiness* (2002) where he defined *strengths* as traits that can be learned or developed. Strengths may take small or large levels of effort to learn, but anyone can develop or hone them. He defines *talents* as inherent, and generally classifies talents as things that can only be cultivated from what already exists rather than something that can be developed through effort (Seligman, 2002). Another way to define these two may be to say that talents are things that people have a natural affinity for, while strengths are skills that are developed with practice.

An example of a talent may be that you are naturally gifted at numbers so you enjoy solving number-puzzles. Perhaps you have a talent for discerning flavors, making you talented at wine tasting. Someone with a talent for creativity may thrive as an artist or musician. Our talents often reveal themselves in these small ways, where you are drawn to practice and use your talent in ways and places other people do not: musicians practicing for hours or someone taking a hike through the woods and noting the natural examples of the Fibonacci sequence along their trail.

Strengths tend towards the intangible, but are no less valuable or important for it. You may have a strength in analytical thinking, enabling you to quickly identify patterns or discern the best next action steps in a workplace. You may have a strength in communicating, making you an excellent instructor or public speaker. Examples of strengths can also include things such as resilience, patience, or self-control.

Do not think of talents and strengths as exclusionary or zero-sum: people are not either innately talented with the highest levels of a gift or absolutely void of a talent all together. That is not how talent is either measured or nurtured: someone talented at chess may initially excel, but if they never practice or study the game they will never be a grandmaster and will likely be surpassed by those with less natural talent who strengthened and built upon their innate talent. An athlete can only get by on natural

talent alone for so long: eventually, they will have to hone and build upon that talent with high-level practice and other skills or they will not reach their full potential.

The biggest pitfall to any discussion on talents and strengths is the inclination to say “I am not instantly perfect at this, so I should completely give up trying”. Even the most naturally talented are not exempt from having to practice their skills! Yo-Yo Ma, a child prodigy who began performing at the age of 4 and a half and who graduated both The Juilliard School and Harvard University, is a world-renowned cellist with awards and honors ranging from Grammy’s to the National Medal of Arts, is perhaps one of the most well-known naturally talented musicians of our time. With more than 50 years of playing the cello under his belt, even he emphasizes the impossibility of perfection and the need to continually practice and hone his talent at the cello. (Steinberg, 2015) Do not get caught up in the trap of perfection.

The next step is self-reflection and honesty. Do not get caught up in the trap of making "interview tactical" lists of your strengths and weaknesses: These are leadership exercises designed to help you discover and cultivate your own unique brand of leadership. Being authentic to yourself is an important element of developing as an *authentic leader*. This can be tough, especially the challenge questions that urge you to ask for input from other people. People are often unaware of their own capabilities and dislike being told what they do well. This ironic blind spot may be the result of imposter syndrome, social norms, modesty, or low self-esteem but this uncomfortable cognitive dissonance can occur whenever there is a discrepancy between how you see yourself and how others see you.

If this is something you find yourself struggling with, try this: Take a “five minute mindfulness” break by focusing on remaining in the moment, acknowledging your thoughts and beliefs and reconciling inconsistencies. Be open to new information and to changing your mind: you may be resistant to the idea that people see you in a certain way, but if multiple people are saying the same

thing it can be sign that you need to be open to the idea that they may be right or that you have a blind spot. Remind yourself your emotions are valid and that growth requires discomfort. This won't solve instantly solve every moment of discomfort from cognitive dissonance, but repeated practice will help you identify your emotions and help you make clear-headed decisions on how to process them.

There are many online tests available, both for free and at cost, to help you identify your own strengths and talents that you can easily find with a simple web search. I encourage you to take advantage of any number of these, especially Martin Seligman's website [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org) In the meantime, you can use the guided prompts on the following pages to begin uncovering your strengths and talents.

Discovering your strengths and talents isn't the end though! Once you identify your own personal strengths and talents, start taking them into consideration during your routine day. Whether at work or home, start considering your strengths and talents when making decisions. Not only does this benefit you by providing those positive emotions, it also allows you to build your own opportunities. Try to find ways to utilize your strengths and talents in your daily habits and routines. Self development alone isn't enough to develop your leadership skills: the final step is to find ways to take your skills and talents and use them to support and enhance your relationships with others. Challenge yourself to find ways to build your strengths and talents in a way that influences and motivates others. By practicing self-awareness, you will be able to adapt your leadership style to the needs of your team, and give them the support, tools and encouragement they need to succeed.

# Reflection

*Self-perception is very complex and can make it difficult to truly “see” ourselves. Use the questions below to try and identify some of your natural talents. Open your mind to reflection and see how these questions inspire you or what they reveal about you.*



Think about your childhood: What did you enjoy doing most? What hobbies did you have or what were you known for?

Think about times you overcame challenges: What were the challenges and how did you overcome them?

Think about the things you enjoy doing: What things do you start doing and lose track of time while you are engaged? Or, what topics do you enjoy reading or talking about with others?

What kinds of things do you tend to pick up quickly? What kind of things are you just plain good at doing (even if you don't enjoy doing them)?

Think about work: What kinds of assignments at work do you excel at? What kinds do you tend to struggle with?

Think about times you were successful: Things that make you proud to look back on or times you were recognized or rewarded?

If you won the lottery today, what activities and interests would you pursue when money was not an issue?

What activities invigorate you, or make you think when you are finished "When can I do that again?"

**Challenge Question:** Ask a close friend or mentor what they think your talents are: Write down what they say, regardless of whether you agree or not.

# Reflection

*Self-perception is very complex and can make it difficult to truly “see” ourselves. Use the questions below to try and identify some of your natural strengths. This is your personal reflection: don’t get caught up in trying to come up with “interview strengths and weaknesses”, instead try to tap into your authentic self.*



When do you feel *energized*? What kinds of activities or challenges give you a feeling of excitement or energy?

Conversely, when do you feel drained? When does an activity seem to drag on and on and just exhaust you, mentally or physically?

Think about a time you were successful. Not just “trophy winning” moments, but moments when you were proud of your accomplishments or had a deep or meaningful experience?

What kinds of activities come easy to you? What kinds are you drawn to or pick up quickly?

What kinds of things challenge you in an enjoyable way? What kinds of things do you particularly enjoy experiencing or learning about - or want to experience or learn more about?

**Challenge Question:** Ask a close friend or mentor what they think your strengths are: Write down what they say, regardless of whether you agree or not.



The third step to cultivating your own style of influential leadership is to connect with others. Leaders do not lead in a bubble: part of leadership is influencing others. While you've already seen the importance of prioritizing your own self care and development, and identifying and playing to your strengths and talents, you cannot be a leader without connecting with others in an authentic and meaningful way. So how can you do that?

**Cultivate a Community.** Find your support system. Maybe that is a close friend, a family member, a mentor or a support group of people. What matters is that you have a resource to turn to that provides support and encourages you to prioritize yourself. Say you have an important meeting coming up with your boss and you are nervous about how it will go for whatever reason. Check in with your support system, let them know "I think I am catastrophizing about this meeting, do you have time to listen and help me process my feelings". Perhaps you have a big presentation coming up and you are nervous. Reach out and say "hey, I could use a pep talk going into this". Expressing your emotional and mental needs to people you know will support you will help you normalize having needs of your own, helping change a mindset that suggests needing help means being selfish.

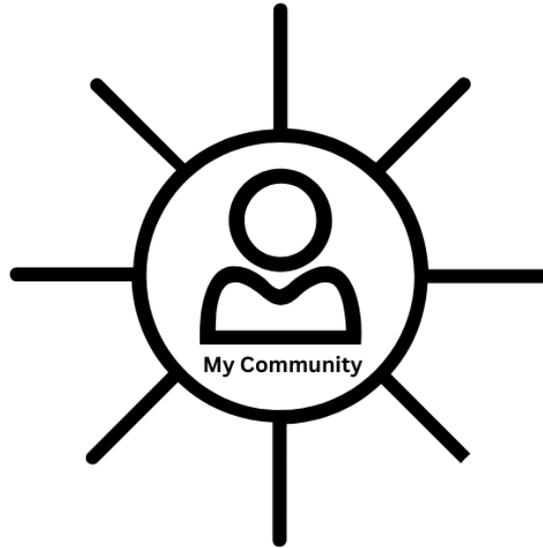
Part of cultivating a community also includes seeking *mentors*. There is this idea that mentors are senior/older individuals taking juniors/younger individuals under their wing in an hierarchical relationship, but the truth is that leaders at all levels from entry level employees to CEO's can benefit from a meaningful mentoring relationships. The term "mentoring" refers to a relationship in which one person (the "mentor") serves as a guide, role model, teacher, and advocate for another (the "protégé") for the purpose of the latter's personal and professional growth and development. Mentors who are not

directly connected to your personal role can provide objective advice or a new perspective. Having mentors can not only guide you in your career, but provide valuable insight based on their experience and knowledge outside of your world of work. For example, a new parent may benefit from a mentor who has experienced the juggling act that is balancing family and children. If you are looking to hone a specific skill, such as public speaking or art, a mentor can help you grow and develop regardless of whether they are connected professionally to your work or not. Sometimes being a leader can be a challenge, and it can weigh heavily on you. A mentor gives you someone to share those challenges with and build a deep, trusting relationship. Perhaps you can act as a mentor to others, sharing your own experiences and knowledge in a rewarding relationship. There is no limit on how many mentors you can seek out, so long as the relationship benefits you both.

Whether you build your community from friends and family or develop a network of mentors and mentees from your professional contacts, having a support system you can rely on is an important element of ensuring you are looking out for your own growth and well-being as well as that of your team.

# Reflection

Think about how you can create your own community. Write out who is or could be part of your community.



## **Need Inspiration? Think about:**

Who shares my passions?

Who can I talk to about what I am going through?

Who can I count on?

What peers share my same rare qualities?

Who inspires me?

Who challenges me in an invigorating way?

Who has overcome challenges I am facing?

Who shares experiences?



You don't need a job title or a specific position in order to be a leader: leadership has nothing to do with job titles and positions. No job description or performance evaluation can replace what is most important in leadership: character, actions and engagement with others. The final step to developing your skills as an influential leader? *Knowing that you are a leader.* No one but you can limit your potential or your success as a leader.

**You aren't a car: you don't need validation to be a leader.**

